

# maybe when we all get older (things will be fine again) by muppetstiefel

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**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven | Jane Hopper/Dustin Henderson, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper, Will Byers & Lucas Sinclair, Will Byers & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

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**Summary:**

"His mom always says that what goes down must go back up again. He never believed her up until now."

A sequel about learning and love and imaginary games.

# 1. Chapter 1

If anyone had asked Will what he expected senior year to be like, he could've given them some pretty wild ideas. Hell on earth, would be his first one. A waking nightmare is another one of his favourite terms. The rest involve high amounts of swearing or are just long screams punctuated by periods of silence.

As he drives to school at the beginning of March however, Queen blasting through the opens windows and his best friend complaining in the passenger seat, he realises how wrong those phrases were.

His mom always says that what goes down must go back up again. He never believed her up until now.

"Can you turn it down?" El moans, pressing the coffee flask to her lips. Will debates ignoring her, because Freddie Mercury deserves to be played loud, but a particularly high note convinces him otherwise. He concedes and turns it down.

El smiles at him and turns her attention back to the window. He never thought silence could be this comfortable with another person. He was wrong.

It's still weird to him, how quickly his life bounced back after he told El everything. There was the initial period where everything was still shaky. The morning after was the hardest, in his opinion. Having to sit down and talk to his mom and Jonathan. Calling Lucas and Dustin and Max. Finally putting middle school behind him.

It got easier after that. He got used to a certain comfortableness. Got used to talking to his mom. Got used to having friends in the hallway and at lunch. Got used to The Hopper's being there more often than then not.

The bad days got few and far between. Now, as he pulls into the parking lot, he barely remembers what they felt like. They instead become like the dull throbbing of a distant headache.

Max is waiting for El, just like she always does. She accepts the flask

gratefully and gulps the coffee down, only pausing to nod a greeting to Will. That's their normal routine. After Will apologised, that day over the phone, they formed this sort of carefully considered alliance. They don't speak much, but it goes unspoken that Max knows. Not only does she know, but she understands. She's the only one who does, really.

El was right, he had realised when making those phone call apologies. They do care. It's an odd feeling, a little intoxicating, but he tries hard not to let it get to his head.

The only apology yet to make is to Mike. Mike has always had a way of making him unravel and Will knows, he just knows, that any attempt at an apology to Mike would just end up with him apologising for everything: for the party, for the staring, for the fists and the words and everything in between. He knows if he starts talking he won't be able to stop. Mike would crack him with his soft eyes and his gentle hands and his unknowingly deceptive ways.

He's still clinging on to Mike, and the idea that he doesn't know just how wrong he is inside. Part of him knows Mike knows, that maybe he always knew. The soft way he said "come on guys," when his friends had been harassing Will in sophomore year was enough of a tell. But still Will clings to the mortifyingly amazing idea that Mike had defended him because they were friends, somewhere deep down. Not because he was the schools walking AIDS poster.

El had suggested he told Mike, once. They were driving to school in amicable silence, an old Beach Boys tape filling the gaps, when she had twisted in her seat to look at him. Will kept his eyes on the road.

"Why don't you just tell Mike how you feel?" she had asked, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Maybe to her it was. Something to do with not having to live in inconsolable fear with yourself.

When he had laughed her off, she had just shrugged and said, "you don't know what will happen until you try."

The whole thing was laughable, but for some reason, Will couldn't stop thinking about it for nights afterwards. The idea of confessing

his love like in a romantic movie. Mike, admitting it back. Mike, intertwining his fingers in his hair. Mike, kissing him.

The thought made his throat dry, panic rising like bile in the pit of his stomach.

No, Mike doesn't know and Mike can't know. No matter what El says.

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The first half of the day is fine. He's getting used to fine, the mediocre feel of it. Days are no longer bad, they are fine and sometimes they are good. More often than not they're just okay.

Things still trip him up sometimes. An odd look or a question in class. One day, he vows to himself, they won't. One day I'll be nothing but happy. Just like everybody else.

Today it's Mike that trips him up. He's disposing of his copy of *Grapes of Wrath* after literature when he sees him. he's used to seeing him out of the corner of his eye, but he's so much more present now, a sturdy figure just ten lockers down.

He finds himself staring at Mike. He has an advantage, from where his locker is, not that he ever used to see it that way. He has a clear sightline to where Mike stands every day. He can see the casual way he slips texts books into the middle of the clutter. He sees when his friends from track, or film club, are there, forming a sort of semi-circle around him.

Now, however, he sees Mike lean forward and press his face against the cool metal of the locker. It's a trick Will knows well. He used to do it on his particularly shaky days, when his body just couldn't stay still. Mike struggles for a breath, seems to catch it in his lungs and pulls back. He looks vulnerable, a little unsure of himself. Like the Mike Will once knew, back before the words and the blood and eyes that had hardened under years of strain.

Maybe that's why Mike slams his locker shut and casts a glance around the hallway to check if anyone saw his brief falter. They haven't. No one has, except Will.

A year ago, Will would've ducked away from the intrusive gaze but now he lets Mike's eyes land on him. They hold there, only for a moment, but it's enough for Will to see. Mike looks small. Fragmented.

*Back pressed to the floor. Breathless, panting. Eyes pleading with the tears collecting just in the corner. Will feels strong, body adrenaline, fists stinging. He doesn't like feeling strong.*

Mike pulls away from his gaze and melts into the sea of students. He heads north. Towards the track field. The gym. The car park.

Will heads north, like he normally does. North means the cafeteria. He used to hate it, ears ringing with the noise of voice clambering over one another. That was his outward excuse, his real one being the table in the corner that Mike occupied.

Mike is gone now. Will can't recall the last time he saw him eat lunch in here. It feels like a flip has been switched, but Will doesn't know why.

He likes the routine that has become usual. Locating the middle-left table and slotting himself into the vacant seat next to El. She smiles when she sees him, through a mouthful of apple, and presses her body into the side of his. It's a half-hug. A welcome greeting.

Lucas sits opposite. He greets Will with words, a warm "Hey," eyes full of conversation waiting to be had. It feels familiar, like putting on an old pair of shoes.

He nods his usual greeting to Max but finds no response. She's bent over a book, pen flying across the paper, nose pressed to the pages. He wouldn't be surprised if she couldn't hear anything around her.

He turns to Lucas instead. "What's she studying?"

"Physics," Max answers bluntly, but doesn't look up.

The answer doesn't explain much, so Lucas fills in the blanks. "It's for her final. She's just now realised she needs straight A's to get into Yale." He breaks off the crust of his bread and slides it to El.

"You're going to Yale?" he turns his attention back to Max. Sitting next to her, on that hill, bodies pressed together, she had told him about travelling. He had been so sure that Max would still be by his side next year. He didn't expect that of Dustin, or El, or Lucas, with their plans and their preparations. He certainly didn't expect that of Mike. No one would ever hold Mike back, Will had no doubt of that.

But if Max is going to college that leaves just him, and Hawkins.

She must hear something in his voice, because she lifts her head momentarily.

"Not if she doesn't pass physics," Lucas is joking, but Max's stare doesn't waver.

"Maybe?" her voice is soft. Unbelievably so. It makes Will want to cry. "I'd like to have the option. Who knows how I'll feel when we graduate but right now I don't want to-"

"Burn any bridges?" Will supplies. He gets it, he really does. He just wishes he hadn't already burnt all of his.

Max turns back to his studying, though he brow is creased and her eyes keep flitting upwards. Will tries to ignore it.

"You okay?" El whispers but he bats her off. He doesn't need pity; he has no use for it anymore. What he needs is to stop thinking about himself, sitting alone in his bedroom, knuckles stained red with someone else's blood.

The distraction comes in the form of Dustin, who throws himself into the seat next to El and slings an arm around her shoulder.

"What did I miss?" He asks, as though it's a secret society meeting and not lunch.

Will just shrugs and lets the conversation carry on without him. It quickly turns to the candy store and its untimely end.

"It's a disgrace," Dustin is declaring as El laughs at him. "Don't laugh. That was my livelihood! I had a profitable little business going and it what? Gets shut down for no reason."

"It is illegal," Lucas supplies, "and very against school rules."

"You're only saying that because you're the student president."

"It would be the truth even if I wasn't."

Will tunes them all out in favour of picking at the sandwich in front of him. Food is still fear to him, but it's a shameful one. It was fine when it was just him and El. Most of the time lunch would slip by and she wouldn't even notice he hadn't taken a bite. But now, there are eight scrutinising eyes instead of two and it would look suspicious, sitting in the lunch hall and not eating a thing. He doesn't want the hushed whispers to return, nor the secrets they carried with them.

So now, he eats a few bites and tips the rest in the bin, waving goodbye to the table as he heads to his last lesson.

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Time now feels weird to him. Sometimes it's like sludge, and he's dragging himself through it. Other times it barely passes and before he knows it he's curled up in the bath, shivering, with no recollection of ever climbing under the shower fully clothed.

He sits down in American History and then he's in the car, knuckles turning white against the steering wheel. He reconstructs the day in his head. Math, Chemistry, Lit, Mike, Mike, Mike, Mike,

He tries again, and this time he recalls Lunch, and History and Climbing in His Car. He lets out a breath, then swerves right. It's the medication, he knows it is. Time was never so sticky before his new dose. His mom had insisted on it, demanded he see a doctor right as

he walked through the door.

*He's drowning. He's drowning under the weight of Hopper's raincoat and his mom's arms that encircle him.*

*"Will, baby," she's crying, nails against back. Jonathan isn't saying anything.*

*"He's alright," Hopper is reassuring, with the steady sound of his voice. He squeezes his shoulder a little too tight, "Him and El were just hanging out."*

*It's a half-lie. Would've been good, too, if Will wasn't still crying and Hopper's face wasn't drawn with nerves.*

*"I'm calling the doctor. I'm calling the surgery right now and we're gonna fix this, Will. I promise you we'll fix this."*

He swerves again, and curses this time. Those damn meds. He's fine, he doesn't need them, he's perfectly fine. Everything is fixed. He has El and Lucas and Jonathan doesn't hate him and he can actually breathe now. Everything would be perfect if Mike would just listen to his apology. But it's fine.

He doesn't remember parking the car, or unlocking the front door, but he must have done because now his shaky fingers are fiddling with the child-proof cap of the medicine bottle. It finally gives under his hand and he empties it upside down, watching the tiny little capsules find their way down the plughole.

Once they're gone he can feel his stomach unknotting. He slams the bottle down a little heavier than necessary and his whole hand vibrates.

One breath, then two breaths, until his lungs no longer feel like they're concaving. He steps back, eyes focusing on his reflection. He looks more like himself then he has in years. His hair is neat, straight lines and edges, only just obscuring his eyes. His face isn't pinched or drawn. He tries for a smile and it doesn't feel foreign.

Inside is different, too. Recently he's been feeling things he'd forgotten. Excitement. Expectation. That light-headed feeling when



you've been laughing too much. They mix together with the anxiety and the dread in the pit of his stomach and make him feel human again.

He studies his reflection. Repeats his mantra.

I'm okay.

I'm okay.

"Am I okay?"

## 2. Chapter 2

### Summary for the Chapter:

"He's concentrating so hard on the new routine that he doesn't even realise it's his birthday until he's surprised by his mom and Jonathan at breakfast."

The new routine quickly replaces the old one.

It's strange, at first, to get used to having friends again. To feel a hand on his shoulder in the hallway and not instantly tensing, ready for a fight. To have someone to pass notes to, to study with, to have a group of friends who share lunches and quiz answers.

It takes some getting used to. For El, it seems natural. She had friends in Nebraska (how could she not) so it's easy for her. As the only two girls in the group she seems to have a fiercely strong connection to Max, but she also has an easy friendship with Lucas and even Dustin, who seems to make her laugh like no one else can.

For Will it's harder. He has to concentrate, to try not to trip up on simple things. "How are you?" throws him the most. Sometimes, he doesn't want to answer it, not wanting them to really know. But their eyes are so kind and their so well intentioned that he can't keep anything from them for too long.

He's concentrating so hard on the new routine that he doesn't even realise it's his birthday until he's surprised by his mom and Jonathan at breakfast.

He's still half-asleep, fiddling with the buttons on his shirt, when he jumps at the sound of the first few words of 'happy birthday'.

The noise is loud, for first thing on a morning, and it's jarring. His mom is singing off key, clapping her hands to a non-existent beat, whilst Jonathan grins at him from behind a camera, mumbling a few words here and there.

Will doesn't even have to look at himself in a mirror to know his

grinning. He can't remember the last birthday he felt so happy. Probably his eleventh, when they drove to Six Flags. When he held hands with Mike in the queue for hotdogs.

He doesn't want to think about that, so instead he lets his mom pull him into a hug and doesn't protest when she hugs him a little too tight. Jonathan reaches over to scrub his hair and he doesn't duck away. It makes him feel like a kid again as he sits down opposite a stack of presents.

They're predictable presents, but Will finds himself elated with each one, turning the books and shirts over in his hands and thanking his mom for every single one. After he's finished with them, Jonathan reaches into the cupboard under the sink and slides a brown paper parcel over the table to him.

"This one's from me," he explains as Will pulls at the paper.

Inside sits a beautiful charcoal coloured sketch pad. He lifts the cover and holds the paper between his fingers, feeling the thick, rough quality. He casts a small glance up to Jonathan. "This must've been expensive."

His brother waves him off with a dismissive gesture, then leans forward in his seat, "do you like it? I had to ask the woman in the shop what was the best. And you need the best for when you go to college."

The air feels still, and Will can feel every second tick by. He turns the sketch pad over and inspects the back cover. It's no different than the front but he needs to do something to stop thinking about college. Jonathan knows that Will's been looking at the brochures, he's seen him obsessively pouring over them at the kitchen table when he thought no one else was looking. What Jonathan doesn't know is that Will isn't good enough for art college, that he hasn't even got a portfolio and he has missed the deadlines for college submission.

Instead he chokes down the rising panic and nods. "I love it. Thank you, Jonathan."

And then he does something he hasn't done since middle school. He

sets the sketch pad down on the table and curls his arms around his brother's neck, pressing his face against his brother's shoulder. Jonathan doesn't react for a minute, arms hanging limp at his side, but then they come up and rest on his back. He feels like he's six again. He feels safe.

He regrets having to pull away, but he has to leave for school if he ever wants to get a parking space. If Will had known a year ago these would be his problems, he would've laughed. It's all so normal.

He's half-way out the door, grappling with the zip on his backpack, when his mom's voice stops him. She's been gnawing at her lip the whole morning, when she doesn't think Will is looking. Will is always looking.

She appears in his line of sight, still holding a bowl and a dish cloth. The bowl is dripping, water droplets repeatedly splashing on the floor. Will watches them for a minute.

"Have a good day sweetie," she smiles, tight-lipped and anxious. He returns the sentiment. "I'm working late tonight so you may not see me till tomorrow morning. But Jonathan will be in and you guys can order a pizza, or whatever you want."

"Yeah," Will finds himself replying, taking a step out of the door, "Sounds good, mom."

"Okay, okay," she's about to shut the door, when she asks, "did you take your meds this morning?"

It's a question of habit, one that she started asking at the beginning of his diagnoses, but right now it makes his chest tighten. He thinks of the medication, swirling down the drain, and the empty orange bottle buried at the bottom of the trash.

But he nods anyway, feet carrying him towards the car. "Yeah, of course. Bye mom!"

He feels guilty for lying, but he has to. He certainly can't take that medication anymore.

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He doesn't know who told El it was his birthday, but someone must've because she's singing to him as soon as she opens the car door. H

He's laughing by the time she's finished her rousing rendition, complete with added runs and the loudest shrieking he's ever heard. "Wow," is all he can manage, and then El is laughing too, head pressed against the dashboard.

It takes half the journey for him to catch his breath today, but when he does he glances sideways at El. "Who told you it was my birthday?"

El taps her nose, "a magician never reveals their secrets." Then, prompted by an eye roll, she admits, "it was Dustin."

The thought of Dustin remembering his birthday is odd to him. They were friends for a while, he supposes. A small, quiet part of himself reminds him that they're friends now. That's even odder to him.

"Oh!" El exclaims, as if she has suddenly surprised herself. "I got you a present."

Will clasps his fingers tighter around the steering wheel as they veer left. "Now is maybe not the best time."

"It's okay, you don't need your eyes," she explains, reaching inside her coat pocket. He wants to ask what she means by that but then the crackly sound of the radio is replaced by the tinny sound of choral singing.

"Is that...?"

"Talking Heads, yeah!" El beams at him, resting her fingers on the car door and tapping out the rhythm.

The sound of Road to Nowhere fills the car. It is bigger than the space

it occupies, but it belongs to the two of them in that moment; just him, and El, alone in his car, with the second song someone has ever given him.

They've listened to it countless times before. Stolen a tape from Jonathan and rewound it until it fizzled and died. Scoured radio stations for the sound of the first opening bars. And now he has it, on a tape that will live in his car stereo.

He wants to keep listening, but they've been sat in the parking lot for nearing two minutes by the time the song fades to a stop. He kills the engine and turns to El.

"Thank you," he says, though that's not enough. He can't remember the last time a friend brought him a present. Well, yes, he can. He refuses too.

El just nods, like she already knows everything he wants to say, and swings her legs out the car.

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He slips into his day, feeling a sort of excitement bubbling under his skin. It's hard to concentrate on class when he knows there is a mixtape sat in his car, just for him. It's even harder when Max looks over her shoulder in Literature and mouths, "happy birthday dumb ass".

He makes a beeline for their table as soon as it's lunchtime, and is greeted by a chorus of "happy birthday" s. He can feel his face heating, but not from being whispered about. It's more like a sort of pride- he has friends who are willing to let people know that they like him. The feeling is exhilarating.

Dustin is late, as always, but throws himself into the vacant seat between El and Will with his usual gusto. He slings an arm around both of their shoulders, grinning at Will.

“Eighteen! You’re all grown up, Will the Wise.”

Lucas and Max share a laugh at the nickname, but Will ignores them and instead nods to Dustin. “I guess so. It doesn’t feel like it.”

“I remember playing DnD in Mike Wheeler’s basement like it was yesterday,” he sighs wistfully, a fake dramatic flair. What else does Will expect from a theatre kid.

“But then again,” he continues, lowering his arm from Will’s shoulder to grab an M&M from Max. She swats at his hand, but misses. “Maybe it was yesterday.”

Lucas is rubbing at his face with the palm of his hand, him and Max both staring at Dustin with a shared incredulous look. “What are you on about?”

“Science,” he says, like it’s that simple. “It’s this theory that we’re like ants, so one day to us feels like a year.”

Max shakes her head. “That’s not science.”

“Can you disprove it?”

“That’s so stupid-”

“No, it’s not-”

Will gives up on trying to decipher their bickering and turns to El, hoping to share a knowing “our friends are idiots look.” Instead, he notices that Dustin still has his arm slung around her shoulder. She’s picking at the crusts of her sandwich, like nothing is out of the ordinary.

He raises his eyebrow questionably, but she just turns beet-red and refuses to meet his eye again.

Huh, he thinks. This day is bringing all sorts of surprises.

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He listens to the rest of the tape on the drive home.

It's a good mix, all in all. The Clash comes immediately after Talking Heads, then Radiohead. There's an odd mix of Tears for Fears and R.E.M but he doesn't mind. The whole thing is so undoubtedly El, and reminds him of every car ride they've shared. It's the closest thing he's got to the real memories.

He leaves the tape in the car, not wanting to forget it the next morning, and heads inside. He knows, realistically, he should start on the mountain of schoolwork that's been building up since January but the very thought makes him feel like drowning, and he wants to enjoy today.

So, instead he grabs his copy of Clockwork Orange and sprawls himself out on the sofa with a tub of ice cream and waits for Jonathan to get home.

He's so absorbed in Alex's deranged world that he doesn't even notice it's dark until he hears the blaring ring of the telephone. He blinks a little, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness of the room, and pulls the phone of the receiver.

"Hey, it's Will," he mumbles. He's expecting Jonathan, calling to tell him he's going to be late home. Or his aunt, maybe, wishing him a happy birthday and telling him there's a card in the post. Maybe even his dad, who sometimes remembers it's his birthday.

What he's not expecting is the breathless sound of heavy breathing, followed by a rushed, "hey, Will, it's me."

He can feel his heart drop to the pit of his stomach the minute he hears Mike's voice. He sounds like he's just run a marathon, which maybe he has, but still Will feels uneasy. Track practise, he has to remind himself, he's probably just at track practise.

"Uh, hi?" he returns cautiously. Some part of him is nervous. In fact, all parts of him are nervous.

Mike must sense this, because his frantic breathing seems to calm a



little, and he says, “don’t worry, I’m fine. Coach just made us run ten miles. He’s a real son of a bitch.”

The conversation feels casual, all too casual, and Will has to remind himself that this is the Mike that hates him. He must be calling for a reason.

Will can’t think of what to say, so he doesn’t. He lets the silence sit for a few seconds, and tries not to tell the boy on the other end of the receiver that he loves him.

Mike clears his throat, and then he’s speaking again, stronger than before. “Anyway, I haven’t got home. I need to get home and- it doesn’t matter. I guess I just,” he trails off, voice quietening on the other end of the line. Will can hear other voices in the background, loud and undisguisable. When Mike’s voice returns, it’s more hushed than before. “I just wanted to say happy birthday, Will. I should’ve said it at school today... I should’ve said it a lot more times before that.”

Will doesn’t ask what he means because he knows. He knows the feeling of watching Mike from a distance as his friends croon a poor rendition of happy birthday, wishing he could be the one clapping him on the back.

He knows. He just doesn’t understand why Mike would know too.

“I should go,” Mike says, then adds, “I don’t know if you’re even still there.”

Will realises he hasn’t spoken since the beginning of the call.

“Well, whatever,” Mike’s laugh sounds bitter and sad. Will knows the sound well. “I guess you have no obligation to listen to me. Not anymore. Not after everything I did.”

Everything he did? Sometimes Will thinks he’s going crazy. He’s the one to blame, not Mike.

“Bye, Will,” he can hear the awkward fumble with the receiver, and is ready for the habitual click.

“Mike?” he hears himself calling. The rustling stops. The sound of gentle breathing fills the line again. “Thank you. For calling.”

“Anytime, Will.”

He’s still clutching the phone when he hears the click.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

A few notes:

- 1) don't go off your meds!! It's not good!! It will come back round to bite Will, so don't get any inspo from his 'miraculous recovery'
- 2) the first taste of Byler, oooooohhhhh. I'm so excited to properly write their relationship as this story progresses
- 3) I watched It the other day and I adore Stanley so much

I really enjoyed writing this chapter, so let me know what you think. more to come soon!!

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Summary for the Chapter:

"He doesn't stop thinking about the phone call all week."

He doesn't stop thinking about the phone call all week.

It's silly, really. It was just a phone call. One that lasted two minutes, tops. But still. It's the most he's heard from Mike since the party. It's definitely the most he's heard from him a long time before that.

He can't stop thinking about the way he seemed to whisper the words into his ear. How gentle his voice was, and how much it speared Will straight in the heart.

The words circle his head for days after. "Anytime" seems like a promise, in a weird sort of way. Will wonders if he should take him up on it. He even picks up the phone a few times, fingers ghosting over the number he knows will put him straight through to the Wheeler's house. It's a silly thought though, so each time he puts the phone down again.

The conversation – if Will can even call it that – was strange too. Will spends the next few nights laying on his bed, trying to decode the messages that were nestled within. The soft, yet harsh way Mike had confessed "Not after everything I did," is hard to shake. Will trawls his memories for things Mike could've done, but each time his mind circles back to the other boy's hand on his shoulder, and then his face coated in red.

And really, he knows he shouldn't, but he can't stop thinking about him. He got awfully good, back in Sophomore year, of not thinking of Mike Wheeler. It took a lot of hard work and practised but he had mastered the art of pushing that boy from his mind.

But now he's back, and with a vengeance. With flitting eyes and a tightly drawn mouth that mirrors Will's own. With head pressed against his locker and secretive phone calls.

Will can't stop thinking about it. He really should stop thinking about it.

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He doesn't tell anyone about it. When Jonathan gets home that night, bearing pizza and an apologetic smile, he asks Will what he missed.

And while Will had vowed that he was going to be more honest with his brother, he finds himself shrugging as he takes a slice from the box.

He doesn't know whether it's the lie or Mike Wheeler's voice that makes him so dizzy, but he has to suppress a smile for the rest of the night.

He doesn't tell El either, when she gets in the car the next morning. She smiles at him as she slips a thermostat of coffee into his grip, before reaching forward to skip a track on the mixtape in the stereo. For a moment he wants to tell her, because she's his best friend and he's not had one of those in a long time, but he's pretty sure they're meant to share secrets with one another.

But then he thinks about Dustin's arm resting around her shoulder and the way she avoided his eye and he thinks, maybe best friends do keep secrets.

Anyway, he likes having this secret. He is content in the knowledge that any passing glance in the corridor would be between just him and Mike, not a third party. Plus, he's scared the butterflies in the pit of his stomach will go away if he does tell anyone, and he likes them. They make him feel nauseous, but alive.

So he doesn't tell anyone about it. He's used to holding things inside, but this is better than any of his other secrets. This secret doesn't hurt anyone. Not even himself.

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Like everything else in his life, it's not long before it dissolves like paper in water.

Max is waiting for him after Literature. He's not used to having the responsibility of someone lingering in the doorway, so he's slow and clumsy as he slides his folder into his bag. Max doesn't look mad though. She looks content to lean against the door, eyes flickering at the passing crowds. She never looks in a rush, and Will doesn't think it's ever more evident than when she's waiting.

He apologises, slinging his bag over his shoulder, but she just shrugs. They don't eat together on a Wednesday – Lucas has student council meetings and El managed to get the secretary position after some kid named Ben transferred. Max uses this as an opportunity to eat lunch with her other friends. Will would too, if he had any. He mostly just eats in the library.

Still, she always waits for him. He doesn't know why, but he's not complaining.

Today the corridors are crowded as Freshman weave their way to and from classes. Max walks through the midst of it with a confidence Will admires. She seems to command the school, whilst simultaneously demanding nothing from it.

"Why does he always set us so much work?" she's complaining, hands wrapping round the straps of her bag in frustration. "I swear he thinks we're robots."

"Literature robots?" Will supplies. He can feel his mouth quirking into an involuntary smile. It's always like that with her.

She parrots a robot, arms and all. "Must. Complete. Three. Sides. On. Frankenstein." Then she laughs, with confidence, at her own joke. Will can't help but laugh too.

It makes him think of El. The way she always has to stifle a laugh at every joke Dustin makes. He thought it was just her, at first, but he realised pretty quickly he's never seen her laugh like that before. It's untameable, and unashamed.

It makes him think of the way Mike used to make him laugh. No. Abort. Not now.

"What's going on with El and Dustin?" he asks instead.

Max frowns, her eyes brows practically knitting together. "God knows." It sounds a little like a joke, but this time, she doesn't laugh. "I tried to talk to her, you know, girl to girl, but- nothing."

The thought of Max doing girl talk is hilarious. He doesn't say anything.

"She's not the secretive type," Max pushes on, and now Will can see actual tangible concern. It's odd, to see it on Max. "I mean she's quiet but she's always been an open book."

"Maybe she just doesn't want you to murder Dustin and dump his body in the bottom of a lake?"

Some of the concern melts away from her face and she laughs. It's short, a one syllable snort, but it's undeniably there. The sound makes Will practically radiate. "It's what any best friend would do."

They round the corner, Max still grinning and Will still feeling something he can't quite place in the centre of his chest.

They see it straight away. In some ways, it's like a stage show. The way it's laid out it would be easy to believe that they are trying to gather an audience.

The girl's back is pressed against the row of lockers, leg cocked slightly, skirt barely covering her knee. It's a little hard to identify her, but Will does. He could recognise Jennifer Hayes anywhere. In middle school, the boys used to fawn over her all the time, but Will could hardly see the appeal. He guesses it's still there, judging by the way the boy is forcing his tongue down his throat.

The boy in question is at least a foot taller than Jennifer, but somehow he doesn't loom over her. Instead he's bent to her height, arms entangled, lips pressed together.

For how much Will thinks about him, he's surprised he doesn't recognise him straight away. It's the letterman jacket that tips him off. The way the name 'Wheeler' spills across the back.

The butterflies are gone, and instead all Will can do is stare. He wants to stop watching, he really does, but his brain won't let him. he supposes he deserves this torture. This is what you get, it's saying, this is what you get for letting yourself be happy again.

He struggles but manages to catch his breath. Max is making a snarky comment, some biting remark about how El "dodged a bullet there. God, teenage boys are so disgusting."

Will can't hear her. He's drowning. He's really drowning. Mike's hand ghosts over her face. God, he wishes that were his cheek, his locker, his lips. God, god, god.

They're pulled apart in the end by some disgruntled and underpaid teacher. The entire hallway erupts into applause, and Jennifer is laughing. Mike is not, red and burying his face in his hands. His fingers are splayed, leaving a little space for his eyes.

Through the gaps between his fingers he locks eyes with Will. He looks unsure of himself, panicked, and so not like Mike. Will wants to pull him into his arms, away from Jennifer and the cheering and the stifling school corridor.

But Mike's lips are still raw from making out with a girl and Will's heart is still broken from falling like a fool, so instead he slips through the crowd and out, out, out.

He realises he still has class. That he left Max in that corridor with no explanation. That he was an idiot for ever thinking Mike Wheeler could like boys, and if he did he'd like him.

That can all wait, he reasons as he curls up in the cars passenger seat and just lets himself cry.

## Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry if this all seemed a bit rushed, but I wanted to get a chapter up this week and I wasn't sure when I'd next have the chance!!

I really appreciate all the lovely feedback on this, it always makes my day to see kudos and especially comments!!

More Byler is coming, I promise these nerds are gonna work their shit out. Mike just has to be an idiot for a bit first!!



## 4. Chapter 4

### Summary for the Chapter:

"He groans and rolls over, pushing his face further into his pillow, like he will black out if he applies enough pressure. He feels achy, but in the wrong places. It's his head that hurts, in the sockets of his eyes and the sharp intake of air through parted lips. It hurts to think. It especially hurts to think about Mike."

He's barely cracked an eye open the next day before the image is back in his head.

Mike, face flushed, lips wet. Mike, leaning down to press against someone's body. Mike, Mike, Mike.

He groans and rolls over, pushing his face further into his pillow, like he will black out if he applies enough pressure. He feels achy, but in the wrong places. It's his head that hurts, in the sockets of his eyes and the sharp intake of air through parted lips. It hurts to think. It especially hurts to think about Mike.

He hikes the cover over his face and chides himself for being so stupid. There's a reason you and Mike aren't friends, he tells himself. The reason has a few different names. His father's favourite was always "fag."

Maybe he can get back to sleep and forget for a little while longer. He's barely slept two hours, really, with the piles of homework he had to plough through last night. When he finally did crawl into bed all he could think about was Mike, and Dustin and El, and the college brochures hidden under the sink. His mind feels busy again now, frantic and unstoppable.

But it's only Thursday and no matter how much he wants to regain the hours of lost sleep, he can't leave El waiting on her porch, or his mom anxiously gnawing on her lip at the breakfast table. That's progress, he tells himself. A year ago he wouldn't have been

persuaded by anything. Now he's all grown up.

He tries not to think of Mike as he gets dressed and shoves the scrawled pages of American History into his backpack. Tries not to think of Mike as he shovels cereal into his mouth, alone at the breakfast table. Tries not to think of Mike as he stares at the phone.

Why Jennifer Hayes? The question won't leave him alone.

The answer is obvious; "Because she's a girl."

Jonathan is in the kitchen, pouring hot water into a thermos when Will heads for the door. He barely registers him as he starts for the door, only looking up when Will starts his usual parting spiel.

"Will," his voice is soft, but he looks startled, coffee trailing down the side of the cup and pooling on the counter. "Check-up?"

Will just stares back at him blankly, readjusting the bag on his shoulder. His mind is reeling (Mike, Mike, Mike) and he can't think straight. "What?"

Jonathan sets the kettle down, brows knitting together. "You have a check-up today. I'm driving you."

"But you have work?" Will finds himself saying. He's going to be later picking El up. She's going to be mad if he's late.

"No, I took it off. It's been in the calendar for month," Jonathan explains, slowly, like he used to do when Will was having one of his episodes. It's helpful. It's condescending.

He pulls at his sleeves; a habit he hasn't resorted to for a while. He still can't think straight. All he can think of is El, stood alone on her porch and Mike, with his arms around Jennifer fucking Hayes.

"I'll miss school?" It's not really a question, more of a statement, but he sounds so confused, even in his own ears.

Jonathan laughs. "Mom already called in. El is picking up your work for you."

“You okay buddy?” Jonathan’s voice is grounding, and Will forces himself to answer. He swallows the lump in his throat and nods, still gripping at his sleeves, pulling them to cover his knuckles.

“Yeah, just tired,” he explains, as though his body isn’t a live wire flitting around several different thoughts.

It’s been like this since he stopped taking his meds.

No, he can’t think that.

His brothers face is still laced with worry, but it dissipates a little when Will swipes his thermos and starts for the car.

---

He never used to forget an appointment here. He couldn’t. the very appearance of one in the family calendar used to make his throat close up for weeks on end. In the beginning, he refused to go. He would do anything to get those hands off his skin, to get away from the whitewashed walls and the clinical coldness of the staff.

Once, when he got home, he had scrubbed at his skin so hard he had bled all over the bathroom tiles. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get the stink of the place off him.

People talk, he had realised quickly. An out of town psych unit is good fuel for their fire. Good for their fists and their gossip.

Now, it doesn’t feel so bad. He sits on the brown plastic chairs and swings his legs, glancing up and down the small confines of the room. It’s not particularly exciting, similar to most doctors’ offices he’s been in with its desk and uncomfortable seats. The people of Hawkins would be disappointed to hear that.

The doctor is a thin woman, hair tightly pulled back, nose crooked. She’s different than last time. They’re always different than last time.

Maybe that's why they cost so much.

She asks him about school. Generic questions, but for once Will doesn't lie. He mentions his friends, but leaves out Mike and Jennifer and that phone call. It's his secret. She doesn't seem to approve of his answer, tapping her pen against the desk, but Will tries not to care about it.

She asks him how he feels. Probes, prods. He shrugs off her questions, like he always does. If his mom was here, she'd tightly squeeze his hand and shake her head. She'd protest and tell the truth, desperate for someone to fix him. But she's not here, and Jonathan has stayed outside, so he says he's fine.

She weighs him. Frowns at the scales. It makes him wince, when her eyes travel down his torso and over his ribs. She says nothing.

She thrusts a prescription at him as he leaves. He smiles as he pockets it, and lies through his teeth about getting it filled out.

---

Jonathan is waiting outside. He's wedged himself into a row of metal seats made to resemble a seating area, and he waves when he sees Will. He pulls himself out, hands thrust into his pockets, and together they walk to the car. It's quiet, and peaceful and exactly what Will needs because his mind is still racing (Mike, Mike, El, Scales, Mike).

"Earth to Will?" Jonathan is teasing, as they pull down one of the quieter side streets near the hospital. Will doesn't recount getting there. He doesn't recount getting most places at the moment.

"What?" He's saying, because his mouth hasn't caught up with his brain yet. "Oh, yeah, sorry. I'm alive."

Jonathan laughs at that. It sounds brittle. "What did they say?"

He shrugs. He can't remember the whole appointment, just fragments. 'Have you been sleeping?' and 'Have you had any

reactions to the medication?’ and ‘Why did he call you if he’s dating Jennifer Hayes?’

Wait, that’s not right.

“Did you get a repeat prescription?” Jonathan is asking, and his voice sounds a little sharp, like he knows something Will doesn’t.

He just shrugs again. Swallows hard. Searches for his lie. “She said I don’t need it anymore.”

“Don’t need what?”

“The medication.” He feels static, on fire and unable to stop his brain from moving. He hates lying, he’s always hated. Once he cried for days after he took the blame when Lucas broke a lamp.

Jonathan says nothing. He focuses on the road, on the steady flow of traffic, sucking a breath through his mouth.

They drive in silence. Will focuses on the curve of the dashboard. Jonathan grips the steering wheel.

“Is that why you threw your meds away?”

The question draws all the air out of Will’s body. He doesn’t like lying, but he’s gotten good at it. Being caught slaps him in the face.

“How do you know about that?” he feels himself constricting inwards. He’s handling this. No one needs to know.

Jonathan keeps his eyes fixed forward, but they flicker slightly to the right with each word. “Who do you think takes out the bins?”

It’s so obvious, yet Will feels so ridiculously foolish. He had thought he had everyone convinced. Turns out secrets aren’t as easy to hide as they used to be in the Byers household.

He doesn’t answer Jonathan’s question. Instead he returns warily, “does mom know?”

His brother shakes his head a little. “Not yet. But she will soon.

You're a bad liar, and worse at doing your own chores." It should be funny, but Will can feel his chest constricting and he's going to suffocate in this fucking car on his way back from a stupid check-up he doesn't even need.

"Hey," Jonathan sounds so far away. "It's okay. I won't tell her."

Good, Will wants to say. Instead he just nods, and presses the palms of his hands against his eyes.

"So long as you start taking your meds again."

An ultimatum. Will wants to shake his head, demand that he doesn't need them, not anymore. But he feels shaky again, and he can't stop thinking about how disappointed mom will look if she finds the empty orange container buried at the bottom of the bin, or how Mike will start looking at him like the freaky fag he is-

He takes a sharp breath. "I don't need them. I'm fine now."

"I can feel your leg shaking. It feels like it's going to vibrate through the roof of the car," Jonathan says, his words quickly followed by a shallow sigh. "It's not weak to admit you still need to take your meds, Will. Not after all the shit you've been through."

He scoffs at that. Jonathan fixes him with a look that makes him reconsider.

"I know you want everything to be magically fixed but that's not how it works."

"How would you know?" Will counters. Jonathan lapses into silence. Then;

"I've watched you go through a lot of shit, Will." His voice is quiet and measured. "And I know that's not the same as actually going through it, but it's made me realise a lot of things. The most important being that you're stronger than anyone will ever fucking realise."

Will swallows hard. "Strong people don't fall apart like I do?"

“Says who?” Jonathan actually looks at him then, for a split second, before his eyes are back on the road. “There’s not a template for what a strong person should look like, Will. Us Byers? We’re all strong.”

His voice leaves no room for argument, so Will doesn’t argue.

Instead, he says in the strongest voice he can manage, “Okay, okay. I’ll take my meds.”

It’ll be worth it, he reasons, just to stop thinking about Mike.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I am so sorry this update took so long!! My life got very overwhelming and I lost inspo for this fic but we're back!! Hope you enjoy this Byers-Centric chapter, I really wantedd to focus on the dynamic between Will and Jonathan before the plot really kicks in. I promise it's coming, and I'm very excited for it!!

If you like IT please check out my fic "take these broken wings and learn to fly" because I'm really enjoying writing it but it's flopping lol. It's very self-indulgent but if you like Stanley, I think you'll like it.

Thank you for reading!! The next update shouldn't take as long as this one!!

## 5. Chapter 5

### Summary for the Chapter:

"It's a different chair, a different hallway. A different principal's office, but it feels overwhelming the same to middle school."

*He makes himself as small as he can. The plastic chairs are uncomfortable, they don't bend to his body quite right, but still he presses himself into a ball. Knees against chest, feet tucked underneath. It should feel safe but instead he feels like he's suffocating. There's nowhere for the air to go when he's like this.*

*His knuckles sting. He presses them against his eyes, hard, until his vision dances with multi-coloured spots. It doesn't make the images go away, nor does it make his knuckles stop hurting. He pulls them away and inspects them; a shining red. They'll fade to blues and purples soon enough. The reminder will be there for a while.*

*The weight next to him shifts. He keeps his eyes trained on his knuckles, then on his feet, which he lowers until they're just scraping the ground.*

*"Why the hell would you do that?" Lucas hisses from his right. Will doesn't answer.*

*There's a hitched sob that falls on him like a crushing weight. If he looks left, he'll see Mike, curled into a ball on the seat furthest from him. He doesn't look to his left.*

He lightly taps his head against the wall behind him. It's a different chair, a different hallway. A different principal's office, but it feels overwhelming the same to middle school.

He's never been here before; he notes as he peers at the row of faculty photos that line the walls. His eyes gloss over them, focusing instead on the clock. Time is moving sluggishly. 3:04. His mom should be here by now.

He shifts in his seat. They're just as uncomfortable as any waiting



room; hospital, shrink, police station. His feet are planted firmly on the floor, but as he shifts they squeak. El looks up from her book – a wrecked copy of *Jane Eyre* – and smiles warmly at him.

“You don’t have to wait with me,” he mumbles, clasping his hands in his lap.

El shrugs. “Joyce offered me a free meal and unlimited reruns of Happy Days.” She flips a page in her book, eyes refocusing on the words as Will sighs restlessly. The Chief is working late, and while El could’ve easily scored a lift from Dustin or Max, instead she chose to wait with him. She keeps saying it’s so she can have a girl night with his mom. Will thinks it’s to stop him running away.

---

His mom is late by another seven minutes. She’s flustered when she arrives, panting and red in the face, but she still smiles at El and pulls Will into the most bone crushing hug he’s ever felt. He tries to tell her they’re already late, but she just bats him off.

“What can a few more seconds hurt?” she cups his face and while he would love to protest, her smile is so reassuring that for a minute he feels his nerves dissipating.

They’re back the minute he’s sat in the principal’s office. The whole room has an intimidating aura to it. It’s immaculate, to start. The entire back wall is oak panelled and the window opens up into the school yard. It looks too shiny to belong in Hawkins, where all the broken things go. The chairs are padded and finished off with a gleaming brown leather. They’re still uncomfortable, though.

The principle shuts the door, sealing El out. He’d insisted she could come in, that he really didn’t mind if she heard, but she’d opted to stay curled up with her book, heading resting on her school bag in the seat next to her. The last thing he sees is her wipe her eyes and

turn the page before the doors cast the room into a dark gloominess.

No one says anything at first. The principle commands authority here, it's his territory, so Will waits, staring at his hands that sit intertwined on his lap. The principle doesn't say anything either, just silently surveys the paper work in front of him.

His mom is bubbling, practically overflowing from the seat next to him. She radiates a nervous energy that seeps out through every inch of her small frame.

She breaks the silence first. "Why was I called in today?" she asks, although she knows. She's known for a week, ever since Will brought that letter home. She just wants to hear someone else say it.

The principle sighs, pinching at his forehead. Will doesn't envy him; having to tell an erratic mother her son is failing high school, has failed high school.

"Mrs Byers-" he starts, already sounding exhausted.

"Joyce, please."

"I believe my secretary sent home a letter fully detailing the situation to you," he finishes, voice hollow, eyes focusing on anything, anything, but Will.

"Oh, no, I did receive your letter," she's bubbling now, uncontainable, a live wire, standing up from her seat, "Which I thought was interesting because this school has not contacted me once the entire time my son has been here. Not once."

"Mrs Byers-"

"Joyce."

"I understand your concerns, but it seems William has flown under our radar for most of his time in this institution." The principle leans back. Will admires him in that moment; his flippancy. He craves to be that carefree about his own life.

His mom crosses her arms tightly across her chest, fingers flexing like

they're itching for a cigarette. "flown under your radar? He's been ill, for months at a time! How does no one notice that?"

"Here's the situation-"

"No, I'll tell you the situation. My son has been sick and none of you noticed, and now he's not even going to graduate high school and walk with his friends because of it? It's bullshit!"

He feels transparent, like a ghost everyone talks about but never acknowledges. A cold spot in the corner of the room. He got used to being talked about, by people in the hallways, by his mom and Jonathan, openly and unashamedly. It still makes his skin crawl.

So he tunes out. Fixes his eyes on the frame of the window and watches the way water droplets work their way into the woodwork. He thinks of nothing. He doesn't think of Mike – it's been easier since he started taking his meds again – and he certainly doesn't think of flunking his senior year.

No, he's not thinking about Mike, or how his arm is almost constantly draped around Jennifer's shoulder or how he won't even talk to Lucas anymore. "He's being weird," is what Lucas had said, like there was anything weird with a track kid having his throat down a girl's throat.

He doesn't think about the completed NYU submission hidden under his bed either, or how utterly pointless it seems now.

The principles voice is distant. A foggy "son?" repeated a couple of times. Will blinks. Refocuses his eyes. The principle is closer than he was before, pressed against the desk, eyes on Will.

"Son? What do you think?"

His mind feels full, his mouth like cotton wool. He clears his throat, swivelling to his mom. She's slumped back in her chair now, mouth pressed together, but considerably less flushed.

"Mom?" he asks, because what else can he ask? He feels like a child again, confused and lost in the maze at Halloween.

She treats him as such. Reaches forward and clasps his hands between hers, rubbing her fingers against his knuckles. “you’re still passing some of your classes. You’d only need a few extra credits and me and Bob figured-” she casts a smile towards the principle and shit, when did that happen? First Dustin and El and now this? Will really needs to start paying attention to other people.

“We figured you could pick up some extra classes,” the principle – bob? – intervenes. “We have some catch up classes, and if you went for an hour a night, you’d be able to graduate in May.”

Will’s throat feels thick with bile. All this time, he’s just been coasting through everything. Ever since middle school, he’s been nothing but a body in those classes, in this school. He’s been happy enough knowing he’s waking up every day without actually thinking about graduating.

It had hit him like a truck when he got that letter, how much he wanted to be out of this place. NYU is still calling him, no matter how much he tries to ignore it. It’s what makes his heart pound, his veins throb with blood.

He sees himself in the robe and cap, squashed into uncomfortable chairs between Lucas and Max. The last movie trips with Dustin. Him and El, enveloped on the hood of his car. Prom night, arms intertwined around-

He finds himself nodding. His blood coarsens with how much he wants it. He wants his happy ending.

---

He had thought El would ride home with his mom. They’ve been talking the entire way to the parking lot, El tucked under her arm, whispering something Will can’t hear. They both keep laughing. It feels a little like they’re conspiring.

Still, when they reach the cars, El tugs open his door and slides into the passenger seat. Her feet are immediately up on the dashboard as he starts the car.

“You should really put your seatbelt on,” he instructs her, pulling out behind his mom.

She quirks an eyebrow. “Why? Planning on getting rid of me? It’s gonna take a lot more than a little car crash.” She leans forward and fiddles with the stereo. It’s been playing up for a while, but the sound of Billy Joel starts playing when she lightly taps the side.

“How did it go?” she asks, arms wrapping across her stomach, tapping along to the music on a phantom piano.

Will shrugs. Then retracts that answer with a sigh. “I’m taking after school classes to get my credits up.” He taps on the steering wheel. Waits.

El leans forward. “So... you’re gonna graduate with us?”

“If all goes to plan, yeah.” He feels shaky. Exhilarated.

And then El squeals. Actually squeals. “If you weren’t driving right now, I’d give you the biggest hug ever.”

He believes her. Let’s out a shaky laugh and then an actual, full-bodied, strong laugh. El’s fingers fly to the window, cranking it down and throwing her head out into the cold, spring air. “My best friend is graduating! He’s graduating!”

“Not yet,” he laughs, rolling his eyes and letting go of the wheel with one hand to tug her back inside. She falls into the seat triumphantly, red in the face.

“I’m just so excited to get to walk with you,” she says, with a certain sincerity.

“You wouldn’t’ve been alone,” he reasons, turning back to the road, “you’d have had Lucas and Max... and Dustin.”

She doesn’t rise to the bait. Just shrugs and says, “it wouldn’t have

been the same without you,” before turning up the music, to wash away any sentimentality.

They drive the rest of the way in comfortable silence, Leonard Cohen crooning softly.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Sorry for the delay on this chapter!! I promise this is the last one that is heavy on exposition, and that the Mike x Will content will really start in the next chapter. We just had to get Will to this point; happy, getting his life back on track and taking extra classes after school.

I really hope people are still reading this!! All your feedback really inspires me to keep going and try to make each chapter better than the last!! I hope you enjoy, and stay tuned for the next update!!

## 6. Chapter 6

### Summary for the Chapter:

"He turns a corner. It's the home stretch to the exit, but he finds himself stopping mid-step. At first, he's not sure whether his mind is playing tricks on him, but the boy in front of him looks solid and real and really pissed off."

His eyes are on the clock.

They should be on the book in front of him, open to a chapter on the civil war, but they're not. Instead they're focusing on the clock, just three inches away from the chalkboard, and the tiny hands inside that seemed to have stopped moving.

He should be grateful for these after school classes. Without them he wouldn't be graduating in May. He'd be stuck in Hawkins High for another year, and maybe another after that. Without these classes, he wouldn't have mailed off his NYU application. He wouldn't be anxiously waiting for the results.

Still, it doesn't change the fact that they're boring. He finds his eyes shifting to the back of a classmate's head. Someone he recognises, but doesn't know. Someone from French, maybe? He looks just as bored as Will, head tipped back, fingers drumming along to an imaginary beat in his head.

Will refocuses on the chapter in front of him. it's pretty rudimentary history, just copying out and answering a few questions. Part of him wishes the classes were harder. It's only been a week and already he feels his mind wandering to unsavoury subjects when there's nothing else to focus on.

He sighs and rubs at his eyes. The drumming boy strains to look at him, smirking slightly. It's friendly, not in any way mocking, and it catches Will off-guard. He can't remember the last time a school acquaintance smiled at him. Probably middle school.

But then again, didn't everything change for him in middle school?

The boy turns back around and Will forces himself to copy out the chapter in front of him in neat print. He feels like he's in detention, writing lines for a crime he didn't commit.

*"Why did you make me take the blame?" he's been crying, and his voice is thick with it.*

*"I honestly didn't think they'd believe you," Mike's eyes are wide, and sincere. He looks guilty, mouth downturned and eyes not meeting Will's.*

*"They're gonna call my mom!" he can feel the anger and fear vibrate through his tiny frame.*

*Mike slings an arm over his shoulder, "They won't, Will. I promise."*

*He believes Mike. He always believes Mike.*

He feels a hand clap his shoulder. The guy from the desk in front hovers above him now, smiling easily, bag slung over his shoulder. Everything about him suggests ease, from the way his hair hangs in front of his face, to his ruffled appearance. "Class is over."

He's the last one out. The corridors are empty when Will finally emerges, bag slung messily over his shoulder, shoes squeaking on the shiny laminate floor. The boy who had shook him from his daydream is long gone, and now it's just him and the school halls.

He dawdles a little, fingers tracing along the display boards. There's no rush, really. The halls are empty but the janitors are in till late. His mom and Jonathan won't be home for a while and he finished all his work at lunchtime. El had helped him with his calculus. She's a genius with that sort of stuff.

He'd been tempted to talk to her, about how he can't stop thinking about Mike. How he's bypassed his meds now and is there, all the time. How it makes him feel a nervous excitement in the pit of his stomach. How he never wants it to go away.

But every time he tries to say something, he feels his words die on his lips. His heart wants to keep the secret, and Will is glad to oblige.



He turns a corner. It's the home stretch to the exit, but he finds himself stopping mid-step. At first, he's not sure whether his mind is playing tricks on him, but the boy in front of him looks solid and real and really pissed off.

He's not wearing his Letterman jacket. It's laying by his side, hung over his bag. The sleeves to his jumper are rolled up to his elbows, which are currently thrust into a bucket of water. He hauls his arm out, water trickling across the floor, and presses a wet sponge to the metal of his locker, scrubbing persistently.

Will takes a hesitant step forward. His hair obscures his eyes, but he would know that look anywhere. It was the one he used to see when they would ruin a campaign in DnD, or that time Lucas 'pushed' him out of the oak tree.

As he gets closer, Will realises Mike is cursing softly under his breath. He thrusts the sponge back into the water and tries again, scrubbing furiously. He looks nothing like the image of him in Will's mind. In person he looks less solid. Thinner, face paler and eyes more sunken. Will wants to reach out and touch his face to check it's not hollow. He resists that desire.

He hears a voice in his ears. Belatedly, he realises it's his own.

"Are you okay?"

Mike practically jumps out of his skin. The sponge tightens in his grip and the floor is treated to a soapy bubble bath. He curses again, louder this time, eyes fixed on Will.

He tries not to wither under the strength of that glare. Instead, he takes a step forward, darting down to retrieve the sponge. "Sorry, shit, sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

He extends the sponge to Mike at arm's length. Even so, they haven't been this close since the party. Will feels like he's getting high off the other boy's presents.

Mike smiles slightly, and takes the sponge. His arm falls to his side, no longer scrubbing insistently. "Didn't think anyone else would still

be here,” he explains, gesturing to the emptiness around them.

“I have extra classes... after school,” he explains, gesturing vaguely over his shoulder.

“Oh, yeah... Lucas mentioned something about that. He said you were applying to NYU?” Mike looks genuinely interested and Will’s heart nearly bursts out of his chest. Mike, talking about him. Mike, thinking about him.

He doesn’t know how to answer, so instead he pushes himself forward to the bucket and sponges. “Do you want some help?”

Mike surveys him with a look of wary curiosity. Then he shrugs, dipping his own sponge into the water. “Be my guest.”

Will picks up a spare sponge and presses it to the cold metal. He can make out the faint ghost of a word scrawled across the surface.

“Dickwad?” he questions Mike, surprising a laugh. It’s odd, how easily they fall together. How natural Will feels by his side.

Mike nods solemnly. “That’s me.”

“what did you do?”

I thought you would have heard.”

“Nope,” he shakes his head. He’s good at dodging school gossip. You have to be, when you’re so often the subject of it.

“It’s a gift from Jennifer,” he sighs, swiping the sponge up, then down, again and again.

“She broke up with you?” That catches Will off-guard. they’ve been going steady for at least two weeks now. They seemed happy enough, sharing lunch under the bleachers. Will’s even seen her wearing his letterman jacket around school. It was so sickly sweet and it made him want to throw up.

“No, I broke up with her. This,” he gestures to the ruins of his locker, “is her payback.”

“What did you do?” Call it morbid curiosity, but in that moment, Will has to know.

Mike groans, rubbing his free hand across his face. “Nothing, I swear. Girls are just like that sometimes.”

“Like what? Crazy?” Will retorts incredulously.

Mike is quick to defend, shaking his head. “No, no. Just... emotional. I don’t think I’ve ever felt like that with a girl.”

“Been with many?” Will quips. Mike swats at him with the sponge, but he dodges effortlessly.

“Fuck off, Byers.”

“How come it’s you? Cleaning it up?”

Mike shrugs. Lapses into silence. Then; “I just thought it was about time I started cleaning up after my own mistakes.”

The silence they fall into is comfortable, and Will allows himself to forget about middle school, or the party or the phone call or the way Mike’s brow furrows in concentration as he scrubs at the words scrawled across the metal. Instead he thinks about how it should’ve always been like this. The two of them slot together perfectly, like two halves.

They’re hauling the buckets of water outside when Will breaks the peace.

“You two seemed good together.” It’s a lousy attempt at conversation, but he has to try. Max will berate him later if he doesn’t at least attempt to find out the gossip.

Mike snorts, using his knee to butt open the door. “Really? Were you watching us?”

Will opens his mouth to protest, but Mike cuts in. “I’m joking. Yeah, I guess we were good together. My friends liked her, my mum loved her...”

“And what about you?”

Mike blinks, “what?”

“Did you like her?”

It’s a simple question, but it catches the other boy off –guard. He thinks, tips his head towards the wind, then shrugs. “Dustin used to have a major crush on her in middle school, remember?”

Will nods.

“She was never really my type,” Mike continues. “If I remember right she wasn’t yours, either.” His eyes fix on Will, hot with a certain type of intensity he can’t quite place.

Will looks away. Swallows. They’re outside now, and the cold is bracing. He hugs his coat tighter to his chest and allows his eyes to wander back to Mike.

He could say something, he realises. He could smooth over the cracks and start again.

“I’m sorry,” he blurts out. “For the party. And... for everything before then. I’m sorry.”

Mike doesn’t look at him. instead he focuses on emptying the buckets down the drain, watching the water swirl and disappear. When he does look up at Will he’s frowning.

“It’s not your fault, Will.” He sounds solemn when he says it, eyes clouded with something. “None of it was your fault. Sure, I’ve spent a long time trying to understand why you did it, but I never blamed you.”

“Why not?”

Mike places the bucket down gently. “Because I know you. You wouldn’t just do shit like that.”

Will watches the ground instead. He doesn’t know how to respond. He always knew Mike was the bigger person, but it’s so much more

evident when said out loud.

“I punched you in the *face*,” he can hear someone that doesn’t sound like himself whispering. “I made you *bleed*.”

Mike laughs. It doesn’t sound bitter, just a little lost and confused. “Yeah. It hurt like a bitch. Not as much as you refusing to talk to me though.”

When Will doesn’t respond, he feels Mike clap him on the back. “Look, I gotta go. You gonna be alright getting home?”

He says it like it’s nothing. Like Mike didn’t just take years of hurt and fix it. Like his eyes aren’t burning into Will’s skin and his mouth isn’t an inch away.

Will nods distantly. He feels far away, somewhere underwater.

Mike forgives him.

No.

Mike never blamed him.

Mike blames himself?

---

Will nearly cries with relief as he drives home.

Instead he cries with some other emotions. He feels like he’s grieving, but he’s not sure what for. For Mike, maybe. For that poor boy with a broken nose and no explanation. Or he’s crying for himself. For the years he spent curled up in his bed, afraid of the world.

He cries for El, too. For the way she drifts off sometimes in the middle of conversations. For the way she can’t talk about her mom

without crying.

He cries for his mom and Jonathan and Mike and how much his heart feels like bursting with the love he has for them all.

He cries for the way he craves to hold Mike's hand in that empty corridor. For the way he wants to fill the gap left behind by Jennifer Hayes. To be the one to make the thin, pale boy feel.

He's not crying when he gets home. He feels lighter.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Sorry for the hiatus!! Here's an extra long chapter with plenty of Byler to make it up to you!!

I had a really dry spell with inspo this week, but I'm going to try and get two chapters up next week so I catch up with my schedule. Anyway, here's what we've all been waiting for!! The start of the boys!! Hope it lives up to the hype I've been building!!

The final chapter of my Stan fic is nearly done, and I have another IT drabble in the works. Also don't forget to follow @muppetstiefel on tumblr to say hi!!

I love you all, thank you for the continued kindness and patience!! seeing your comments and kudos make my day when I'm stuck at work xx

## 7. Chapter 7

### Summary for the Chapter:

"It's been different since kindergarten, slightly off. If he were a hypochondriac, had say it's an arrhythmia. That maybe he was born malfunctioning and that's why he's so different to everyone else. They all smile so easily, like they can breathe without this odd thumping inside their chest."

His heart beat has changed.

It's been different since kindergarten, slightly off. If he were a hypochondriac, had say it's an arrhythmia. That maybe he was born malfunctioning and that's why he's so different to everyone else. They all smile so easily, like they can breathe without this odd thumping inside their chest.

He presses his head against the window sill. Tries to ground himself in the swimming sheets and darkness of his bedroom.

He knows what it is. Knows why his heart makes him feel dizzy. It's beating to the rhythm of one word. One name.

Mike.

Mike.

Mike.

It's nauseating. He tips his head forward and scrubs at with his fingers. Presses his eyes shut and then opens them. They struggle to re-adjust to the gloom of the room. The door sits open slightly on its hinges, allowing a thin column of light to grace the room. There's homework in his bag. Dirty dishes sat on the draining board. He can't work up the courage to deal with any of it.

Instead he sifts through his memories of Mike. tries to work out the exact moment he became so all-consuming.

His eight birthday, Will decides. The cake was chocolate, with a dark blue icing, decorated with planets and constellations. Mike had scooped some off with his palm and wiped it across the bridge of Will's nose. Mrs Wheeler told the two of them off, but neither cared.

Later they had hidden away in the attic, away from the other children. Mike didn't even like them, he said. He didn't even want them here. He just wanted Will.

He groans and pulls himself off his bed. He knows the drill; knows if he curls in on himself, in his bed on a Tuesday night he'll never be able to unfold again. It's happened before. He doesn't want it to happen again.

He's halfway to looking for a distraction, when he instead finds himself in front of the phone. He doesn't know what he's searching for here? Someone else to tear his mind away from Mike? Mike himself, to explain why everything had to end the way it did?

No, he knows why. He hit him until his face caved in. He made him bleed. It's all his fault.

Is it?

His fingers move automatically, dialling a number he knows by heart. He presses the receiver and for a minute all he hears is his own breath now, heavy in his own ears.

There's the dialling tone. A soft click. Then a voice he knows all too well.

"Hopper residence, El speaking," she sounds cheerful but mechanical, and for some reason Will almost sobs into the receiver. He doesn't know why he even called. Just knew he had to talk to someone before memories tore at his own skin.

"Hello?" she asks again, voice wary, and it makes Will laugh because he realises he hasn't said anything.

"Hi, sorry, it's me. Will." He stumbles over his words awkwardly but it's okay because El is smiling. He can hear it through the phone when she speaks.



“Will, hey! Thought I was in the start of horror movie then. You okay?” She sounds a little concerned and maybe that’s fair enough. They used to call all the time, but they’ve fallen out of it recently. The pressures of senior year, he presumes. The appearance of Dustin. Mike. Mike. Mike.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine,” his mouth functions of autopilot, his brain taking a little while longer to catch up. He stops himself before he distracts from why he called. He has to talk about this – about him – because he can’t stop thinking about all of it.

Plus, El cares. With her wide eyes and thoughtful nods and the way she presses him against her shoulder in easy, uncomfortable hugs.

She loves him, he thinks. Without any reservations. The thought makes him dizzy.

“I talked to Mike,” he says, voice blunt in a way he has mastered.

There’s a moment of silence. He can hear El breathing. She’s thinking, he knows that. Trying not to say something wrong and misstep. He winds the chord of the phone through his fingers, peering round into the living room. His mom is sat at the table, sifting through letters. Jonathan is just getting in, hanging his coat over a chair and unwinding his scarf. He bends down to peer over mom’s shoulder, eyes shifting across the pile of letters.

Will looks away. El finally sucks in a breath and asks the question. “About?”

Will shrugs like a reflex, before pressing his shoulder to the wall. “Everything, I guess.”

“Everything?” she probes. He can hear the phone shifting in her hand.

He knows what she means. Did you tell him you love him? Did you tell him your heart beats to the sound of his name? Did you tell him living without him is like someone standing on your chest without sign of relenting?

Neither of them say it, but they both know.

"No," Will murmurs into the receiver. "No, I just... apologised for the party. And for the... blood."

"How did he take it?"

Will breathes out. "He was weird. He said..." he closes his eyes. His heart thumps in his chest.

(Mike, Mike, Mike.)

"He said it wasn't my fault."

El laughs, short and staccato. Will wants to laugh with her but he can't. His throat is stuck.

"Why is that weird?" she says, like she's solving a riddle everyone else seems to think is impossible.

The answer is on the tip of Will's tongue – "because it is my fault" – but he pushes it down. El would just disagree with him, and he doesn't have the energy to argue back today. Not when everything is moving at a hundred miles an hour and all he can see is Mike, scrubbing at that word on his locker.

Instead, he thinks about Mike's gentle eyes and the way they seem warped. He hasn't looked into them for so long, and when he did properly for the first time today, everything had shifted. Mike isn't invisible. He's fractured.

Will tells her as such. "He seemed so sad, El."

"You should talk to him," she says decisively.

He groans, runs a hand over his face. "I just told you, I talked to him today after class."

"No, actually talk to him. Listen to what he has to say." She persists.

"He won't want to talk to me."

"He talked to you today, didn't he?"

“Only because it was just the two of us. Things aren’t the same with other people around.”

“Bullshit,” he hears the chief shouting in the background. Hears El shout back an amused apology. “Look, Will, if you don’t talk to him, I’ll do it for you.”

“Oh yeah?” he can feel himself smirking involuntarily. “Maybe I’ll talk to Dustin for you then.”

El laughs. It’s warm and rushes straight to his gut. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“When are you two gonna give up already? It’s getting old.”

“I will when you do.” she says it teasingly, but it makes Will’s gut tense all the same. He can’t just ‘give up’. Can’t have the boy in his mind and heart. Even if Mike was like him, even if something had malfunctioned in his heart back when they were eight, he still can’t have him. That’s not how it goes.

Jonathan emerges from the kitchen just as Will is searching for a response. His face is pulled into a tight frown. “Dinners ready,” he says in the voice he reserves only for Will. Normally it would annoy him, but now he’s looking for an escape, so he’s grateful.

“I gotta go, El,” he says as Jonathan disappears back around the corner.

“We’re talking about this tomorrow, okay?” El says, voice laced with motherly concern.

Will rolls his eyes. “About you and Dustin?”

“Stop deflecting,” she scolds fondly. There’s a lapse of silence where no one speaks, and as soon as Will launches into a rambling goodbye, El cuts him off. “We’ll sort this out. You’re stronger than you think.”

The line goes dead. Will just hopes she’s right.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

I'm so sorry, I actually hate this chapter so much and it's also really late. My computer decided to wipe itself, meaning I lost all of this fic. I had to rebuild what I had from my memory and this is really bad but I just wanted to put something out. I feel so bad about it but I promise good content is coming soon to make up for it :(((

## 8. Chapter 8

### Summary for the Chapter:

"The next morning, El squeezes into the passenger seat with a plate full of pancakes. When Will raises an eyebrow she simply sets them down on the dashboard and fastens herself in.

"Dad made them this morning," she explains, tearing a chunk out with her fingers and offering it to Will. "Thought they might cheer you up."

The next morning, El squeezes into the passenger seat with a plate full of pancakes. When Will raises an eyebrow she simply sets them down on the dashboard and fastens herself in.

"Dad made them this morning," she explains, tearing a chunk out with her fingers and offering it to Will. "Thought they might cheer you up."

He takes a piece and shoves it into his mouth without thinking twice. It sits uncomfortably on his tongue for a second before he swallows, throat closing up at the abject idea of food. Still, it's nice, buttery and slightly warm, and for once he doesn't feel sick.

"Who said I needed cheering up?" he starts the car in reverse, stomach reaching out for more pancake but he resists. They still have to get to school. Then, he tells himself, he can eat.

El pulls a face. Her legs are pressed to her stomach, hand trailing out the open window, and Will's heart clenches at the familiarity. "Okay, not cheering up," she waves her hand dismissively, but she's still smiling at him, a gentle smile that is reserved for car journeys such as these. "Just think of it is as a 'high school sucks and I'm so proud of you for deciding to spend more time there' sort of thing."

"I didn't really have a choice," he returns but he's smiling too. "It was take extra classes or stay for another year."

“Any word from NYU?”

Will hums along to the radio, avoiding answering her. He’s still waiting for the brown envelope in the post, the definitive answer to the question ‘am I good enough?’ that won’t leave him alone. Max got hers. Lucas too, obviously. He doesn’t even know if Dustin has applied. El is still waiting. And Mike...

“No,” he answers, fingers clenching just a little harder on the steering wheel.

“Same,” she sighs, tilting her head back. “We’re twins.”

“Rejection twins,” Will mutters under his breath. El laughs, a full-gut laugh that shakes her whole body. Will feels the familiar heart clench again, and presses his foot down on the acceleration.

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“Okay, so... Vampire or Werewolf.”

“Neither.”

“You have to pick one!”

“Well, I pick neither.”

“You’re no fun, you know that?”

“It’s just a stupid game.”

Will rests his forehead against the table in the cafeteria and focuses very hard on drowning out the noise around him. It’s only lunch and yet his bones ache with tiredness and he just wants to sleep forever. He wishes it were possible. Curses to senior year.

It’s just the boys at lunch for once – El is studying for Spanish in the library and when Will asks Max what she’s doing for lunch she stubbornly reminds him that she has other friends. She likes to do

that, though Will has yet to meet them.

The table feels emptier without the other two. Lucas has spread out across two seats, feet up on the chair, sandwich practically disembowelled across the table. He's eaten the ham, but left the bread. Dustin seems to be occupying more space too. He looks a little lost without El by his side. Will still isn't sure what the two of them are, but it must be something because every time he brings it up, El changes the conversation. Dustin is scribbling notes into the margins of his copy of *To Kill A Mockingbird*, an activity that would look like study to an outsider. Will knows better than to think it's anything that simple.

He's picking at his own lunch, eyes dancing around the cafeteria. He never expected to feel so comfortable here. There are some jocks in the corner, tipping water over each other and screaming. It doesn't bother him at all.

He can't see Mike.

"Will, dude," Lucas is waving in front of his face, leaning across the table. "Earth to Will?"

"Huh?" Will replies eloquently. Lucas laughs and leans back into his seat.

"After school classes are really taking it out of you, huh?" Dustin looks up, scratching at his nose. His smile is warm and reassuring.

Will just shrugs. The classes are fine. Even the work is fine. It's Mike that's taking it out of him. The boy is all-consuming.

"How are they, anyways?" Lucas looks genuinely curious as he tears at a slice of bread. Will tries not to wrinkle his nose at the sight. Food is still unappetising to him at the best of time. He thinks back to the pancakes, and how he and El had eaten the rest of them in the car that morning, watching the crowds of school kids flood the carpark. God, he misses those pancakes.

He goes to shrug again but stops himself. "They're alright, I guess. They're long? And sometimes they set us work that is stupid easy

but...” His voice trails into nothing. He’s still not good at talking, never will be really. Too much social interaction missed. Too much time spent in solitary silence.

Lucas and Dustin just listens. They’re good at that, for people so loud and confident. The latter boy nudges him playfully when he stops talking. “Just close your eyes and think about NYU, Will the Wise.”

“Please stop calling me that,” he tries to sound stern but his mouth quirks into a smile.

Lucas shakes his head. “Oh god, he’s never gonna stop now.”

“Why would I stop?” he retorts. “It’s a wicked nickname. I wish I had a nickname like that.”

“You vetoed all my ideas.”

“Your ideas sucked.”

Will likes them, he really does. But the crucial thing about being friends with them is learning how to switch out. If El and Max were here he’d share an eye roll with them. Instead, he presses his face into his folded arms and squeezes his eyes shut.

He could fall asleep, if it weren’t for the putrid smell of the cafeteria. Or the noise.

Or the way the seat next to him shifts with new weight.

He lifts his head up slightly and is greeted with the side profile of Mike Wheeler. He’s leaning forward in his seat, tilted towards Lucas, eyes focused in concentration.

Part of Will wants to push his face back into his arms and ignore his presence.

The other part of Will – the part that strains with the very thought of Mike – forces his head up, up and into the throw of the conversation.

It’s a quiet conversation. Something about student government that Will doesn’t understand and doesn’t want to understand. Mike is



resting on his elbows, which are splayed on the table, letterman jacket creasing under the weight and fold. Lucas is laughing slightly, eyes crinkling, but Mike isn't. Mike is concentrated, and serious.

Up close, he looks tired, eyes shadowed with blotches of black, lips quirking but shaking ever so slightly with the effort. Will wants to reach out and rub out all the tiredness. He resists.

Mike is raised slightly in his seat and keeps shifting. He doesn't look comfortable here, which is odd. Through everything he never stopped being friends with Lucas. Will isn't sure about Dustin, who seems to be pointedly refusing to look up from his book, but Mike and Lucas have always been thick as thieves.

But still, Mike looks uneasy, uneasily rising and rearranging his weight. His eyes flicker back to the centre of the cafeteria and oh—he's looking at the table opposite them, filled with seniors Will recognises as the film club, where his bag is sprawled across the only empty seat. Will's heart shouldn't clench, but it does. What was he expecting? For Mike to come and sit with them?

Kindness has made him unrealistic. He was never this foolish when he didn't have friends.

"Do you know where she is?" Lucas is asking when Will finally forces himself to pay attention.

Mike shakes his head, looking genuinely apologetic. "No, sorry. Just that she was looking for you."

Lucas uses the palms of his hands to push himself out of his seat with a resigned sigh. "Guess I better try and find her. The burden of being student president."

"What's going on?" Will asks, eyes searching Lucas, who is throwing his lunch back into his bag. Mike startles, looking to Will as though he's just realised he was there. Will does not look back, keep his eyes focused on Lucas instead.

"El said there was some sort of riot in the library. Some Sophomores getting riled up about banned books or something."

At the mention of El, Dustin perks up, book already half-closed on his fingers. "Why are you dealing with it?"

"Because I'm student president, dipshit."

"That doesn't mean anything," Dustin quips, making Will laugh slightly, under his breath. He can feel Mike's eyes trained on the side of his face, watching him inscrutably, but he doesn't react.

"Maybe I should come with you?" Dustin is saying, already slinging his backpack over his shoulder. "You know, for protection."

Lucas snorts, but is already starting for the library, Dustin trailing behind him. They're bickering as they leave, Will can tell by the way Lucas is gesturing with both arms, and he is intrigued by whatever news of El's has pulled them both to the library. He would follow, if he weren't bound to his seat by a certain Mike Wheeler.

"Uh, hey, Will," Mike's voice is soft, and he's shifted in his chair so that while he's sat next to Will he's also looking directly at him.

"Why aren't you with your track friends?" he spits, immediately regretting the velocity of his words. What right does he have to be angry? Something about Mike makes his brain short circuit. The last time they were this close, the last time he was this angry-

Mike cringes – probably with some sort of feigned embarrassment – and blurts out, "They're practising. Big meet tonight. I should probably be out there too, but I look like shit and coach would pull me if he saw me like this."

"You do look like shit," Will says. He doesn't mean it.

Mike laughs, so quietly that Will nearly doesn't hear it. But it's there unmistakably, in the way his eyes shift. "I knew I could always trust you to be honest with me, Will."

Will wants to ask 'what the fuck does that mean?' but then Mike is changing the subject, hands clutching at the algebra book sat discarded in front of Will.

"You've got Ms Terry this year," he says decisively, flicking through a

few pages and scanning them.

Will shrugs. Forces words out of his throat. "Yeah."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

Mike clears his throat, eyes shifting as though watching his surroundings. Will recognises the trick from middle school, where they couldn't get through one lunch without merciless teasing. It's not like that anymore. No one teases Mike. people admire him.

Still, he scans the cafeteria, then leans forward in his seat. "I could help you study, you know. If you needed some help or anything. I only got a B last year, but-

"Max is helping me," he says, because it's true. Still, he regrets it when he sees the way Mike's face falls for just a second. "Sorry," he adds, tone casual but stomach knotting. Shit, shit, shit. He always causes more damage. Why is he like this?

Mike waves him off, "don't worry about it. The offer still stands, though, if you get sick of Max."

"The door to Mr Wheelers office is always open?" Will replies with a smirk and Mike laughs, full bellied, rocking back in his chair with the effort of it all. Being with Mike is easy, it always has been easy. He just doesn't deserve that.

"Couldn't have you flunking algebra," Mike returns and there's a certain sincerity to his voice that makes Will advert his eyes. He wants to ask, wants to ask why Mike looks so tired all the time, why he dated Jennifer if he didn't even like her, why he's sat here with Will despite his seat at a table a few meters away.

He doesn't though, because there's someone else filling the vacant seat opposite Will, chair creaking slightly under the sudden shift of weight. Mike pulls back – when did he even lean in? – and presses his lips into a thin line, nodding to the person opposite.

"Hey Max," he greets with a forced friendliness that makes Will

frown. Aren't they friends? His memories are hazy sometimes, but he distinctly remembers them together at Lucas' party. Remembers her look in Literature, back in middle school, when Mike told her what he did.

"Wheeler," she returns coolly, eyes glossing over him and onto Will. "Where did Lucas and Dustin go?"

Will shrugs, focusing instead on the algebra book Mike had been flicking through, now sitting discarded in front of the other boy. "Some sort of... Library riot?"

Max doesn't answer, eyes still searching Will but he definitely doesn't look up. His face is too flushed, his mouth dry, like he's been caught doing something he shouldn't.

Next to him, Mike is pulling himself up from the chair and folding himself out to full height. He clears his throat loud enough that Will looks up, catching the other boy's eyes. They're filled with a certain intensity that's almost terrifying, and would be if it weren't for the way his lips were quirked into a small smile, that focuses solely of Will. He fights down a tidal wave of longing, the way his heart is trying to pulse out of his body, and instead shifts his eyes away.

"Uh, bye Will," he mumbles, body already moving back and away, away from Will. He doesn't watch him go, too busy patching back up the tenderness around his heart where it has burst through the skin.

He meets Max's eye instead. She quirks a brow, but says nothing, so Will speaks instead. "I thought you were having lunch with your friends?"

"You looked like you needed help," she shrugs, eyes straining past him and presumably landing on Mike, who Will assumes has slumped down into the vacant seat. He's probably leant against someone's shoulder. He's probably laughing at some joke, eye's crinkling. He's probably happy there, not awkward and stilted.

He doesn't realise Max's attention has shifted back on to him until she starts speaking. "You know you can tell him to get lost, right?"

Will nods, because he does know. One word – one fist – and Mike will leave him alone again. It's easy enough to destroy the fragile bridges he's rebuilt.

But something in his heart is stopping him. He's better on his own, better without the yearning that fills his soul to just close the gap and brush the stray hair from Mike's eyes, smooth over the cracks in his porcelain skin. Yet something, in the epicentre of his heart, beats to the rhythm of Mike.

He wishes he were strong enough to stop it.

Instead, he just nods, and murmurs, “yeah, I know.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Massive apologies!!! This chapter took me so long to get out, there were 12 drafts in total and it was a nightmare!! Honestly, I've been having a really eventful time with work and college and then moving house - which I literally forgot about lol - so I haven't had much time to write. I just want to say a massive thank you to everyone who has been so patient and is still reading, it means the world to me.

Good news: to make this truly slow-burn, this fic is gonna be longer than 15 chapters!! I'm thinking maybe 20 atm but that could all change.

Bad news: updates may take a little longer. I'm aiming to get out at least one a week from now on but it could be a little longer sometimes? please bear with me!! I'm only human!!

## 9. Chapter 9

### Summary for the Chapter:

"The car wheezes and splutters, failing to come to life. Will frowns. It's old, the car, but faithful too. It never gives up without a fight. He traces a hand along the dashboard and tries again, waiting for the familiar hum of the engine. It never comes."

For once in his life, Will is in a hurry. He has a place to be.

That place is home, in bed, with a mug of warm milk. His head is throbbing like someone has pounded it in with a mallet and he's been stifling yawns all through the after school workshop. All he wants is to crawl into bed, in a dark room, and go to sleep.

He's the first out of the door, backpack slung recklessly over one shoulder. Instead of his usual, sluggish walk he finds himself half-skipping to his car, surpassing any expectations ever held for him by his middle school gym teacher. He used to run behind them as they circled the field, hurling encouragement so close to insult that Will had been sure that he had some sort of vendetta against the two of them. Mike had just laughed it off, which made Will laugh too. He had gotten a stitch in his side.

He hasn't thought of Mike since lunch, but now he's back in full force, occupying every space in his mind. Maybe it's because of the track meet that he had mentioned earlier. Will finds himself glancing towards the track the minute he's out the school doors, but finds it vacant.

Instead he tugs at his car door and throws his stuff into the passenger seat. Normally he'd sit for a while, half-heartedly skipping the radio till he finds the track he wants. Or picking at his lunch in the privacy of his car.

Today though, the headache overtakes his need for good music, and he finds himself jamming the keys into the ignition while the door is still slightly open.

The car wheezes and splutters, failing to come to life. Will frowns. It's old, the car, but faithful too. It never gives up without a fight. He traces a hand along the dashboard and tries again, waiting for the familiar hum of the engine. It never comes.

Again. Nothing. It seemingly chokes on its own fumes and goes quiet again. Will finds himself with tears in his eyes but doesn't know whether it's from the searing headache or the shame. The car never broke down on Jonathan. And if it had, he'd know how to fix it. He's good with things like that. Knows how cars tick, how they run. Will knows nothing. For the first time in months, he longs a little for his bike, and wishes it was stowed in the boot for safekeeping.

He's mournfully deliberating whether to walk home or find a payphone to call for help. Who would he call? Not his mom, who's still at work, or Jonathan, who's lacking the means to collect him. Dustin, maybe? Lucas would help, of course he would, but his schedule keeps him so busy, and he doesn't owe Will anything anyways-

He swings his legs out the car and pulls himself up on autopilot. Instantly he collides with a sturdy something and stumbles a few steps, back pressing against the frame of the car. The something reaches out and grasps at his arms, steadying him in place.

Will blinks a little, astonished. He never thought to check for a person loitering outside his car. The idea seems laughable.

The something – someone – lets their hands drop and awkwardly shuffles back. The way their positioned, Will finds himself face to chest, but he can distinctly make out the curve of the school crest and the thin torso of his mysterious... stalker? Saviour?

"God, I'm sorry," Mike is saying, hand batting at his hair which keeps falling in his eyes. He's still wearing his track uniform, sports bag slung across his front like a badge of pride. His skin has a certain sheen to it, like sweat or sunlight.

"I thought you saw me," he's laughing a little, under his breath, and the sound only makes Will's headache worse. "I was waving like crazy."

"I was..." Will starts, but finds excuses empty. Sure, he spent so many years avoiding Mike. He's spent quite a lot of time watching him recently though. And yet he still isn't looking when it's most important. "Lost in thought," he settles on, trying for a smile that probably looks as strenuous as it feels.

Mike just nods in response, eyes already leaving Will's and flitting behind him instead. Will follows him, trying to regain his attention, but instead finds himself looking at the carcass of his car. Mike moves out, slowly, like approaching a wounded animal, and smooths his hand along the bonnet. "Car trouble?"

Will nods, even though Mike's not looking at him. He clears his throat, "it just wouldn't start."

Mike looks almost sorrowful, eyes glazing over the dented sides and front. On anyone else, it would look ridiculous, but somehow, on Mike it looks beautiful.

"Probably just tired, the old thing," Mike is murmuring, fingers tracing the wing mirror now, delicate and careful. He rounds on Will with a sudden intent, making him take a small step backwards. "Boy or a girl?"

"Sorry?" Will can hear the humour on his voice, but Mike's face is anything but humorous. He watches Will with a careful consideration, head tilted, lips slightly parted. His fingers play with the strap of his sports bag.

"The car," he says, like it's simple. "Is it a boy or a girl."

Will finds himself laughing, full laughing, which makes Mike smile with a baffled expression. It's so cute, and the minute Will sees it, the air disperses from his lungs.

"It's a car..." he says simply. Mike doesn't move, focused in, frowning like Will is the odd one.

Will heaves a sigh and rests a hand against the car door, which still sits ajar. "I guess I never really thought about it. It's Jonathan's really. I'm just a temporary custodian."



Mike drops his gaze. Will searches for it, the way he always does. Sometimes he wonders what he would do to capture Mike's attention. The truth of the answers scares him.

"Since when were you such a big car person?" he says instead, which makes Mike huff out a half-laugh.

He shrugs non-committedly. "Guess I'm not really. I never cared for all that engineering stuff, that was all Dustin..."

He stops, eyes shifting, focusing now on the headlights, which are cracked slightly. He crouches down to inspect them.

"These things are alive, you know? They listen to us. They carry us. They put up with our music taste and our shitty friends and us crying in the early morning. The least we can do is give a shit about them."

As he stops speaking, he glances up to Will for conformation. There's something in his eyes, something shining but unspoken, and its intensity holds Will, if just for a second.

Mike pulls himself back up to full height. Straightens himself. Shrugs again and grins, "Looks like a girl to me."

Will thinks that settles it, but Mike isn't moving, just hovering by Will, who is hovering by the open car door. He's already itching to climb back into the safety of the car, despite knowing it won't start, just so he can hyperventilate in peace.

Instead, Mike claps his hands together, already starting back a few paces. "Come on, I'll give you a lift."

Will opens his mouth to protest but Mike is already cutting him off, raising a hand to silence him. "It wasn't a question, Will."

"What about my car?"

"Call a mechanic. What else are you gonna do, drag it home?"

He's still walking backwards, and as much as Will wants to resist, his headache is still persistent enough to drive him forward, and after Mike Wheeler.

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“How was the meet?”

The atmosphere in Mike’s car is amicable, windows rolled down, tinny pop drawling from the speakers. They’ve only be driving for a few minutes and already Mike is leant back comfortably in his seat, head reclined, tapping gently at the wheel. He looks in his element, surrounded by crumpled cans of Coke and Payday wrappers, scattered across the dashboard. The car is just as well-loved as Will’s (Jonathan’s) but in a different way. It gleams a little more in places, but the seat is worn threadbare from use and there are blankets – actual blankets – coating the backseat. Will had wanted to crawl in when he saw them.

Instead he sits awkwardly in the passenger seat, bag tucked in at his feet. He’s unsure what to do with his hands so they sit in his lap. He finds himself picking at the skin around his fingernails, a habit he had killed in middle school.

The past seems to be back to haunt him, in more ways than one.

Mike scoffs a little at the question, as though there’s some joke Will doesn’t quite understand. He’s a careful driver, eyes fixed on the road, but he does keep glancing at Will occasionally, as though expecting him to disappear. It’s new. It’s reassuring.

“It was... tiring,” he settles on, voice dimishing into nothing. Wil can hear the weariness laced into it. “But good, I guess. I didn’t throw up.”

A small laugh escapes Will. He feels the familiar throes of childhood encircling him. He can’t be quiet around Mike. He’s good at being quiet around everyone else, but he can’t, he can’t around Mike. “Do you usually throw up?” he teases.

Mike raises his eyebrows, head tilting slightly so he can survey both the road and Will. “You’d be surprised.”

Will wants to laugh again but he stifles it. It should feel odd, coiled up in Mike Wheeler's front seat. He imagines this is what it feels like to Mike's track friends, or his girlfriends. Did Jennifer tease him in the front seat of his car? Did El?

In a way it does feel odd. But in an even bigger way, it feels comfortable and easy.

Mike shakes him from his thoughts. "Do you want some drugs," he asks in a low voice, then taking in Will's mortified look, frowns. "For your head."

"What?" Will blanches. He feels like his ears are full of water. One minute he felt like he was seven again, arms wrapped around Mike's waist, clinging to the back of his bike, and now he's been pitched through the windscreen of life. His stomach lurches a little. Mike. Drugs. He can't comprehend the two.

Mike must sense his panic because his frown deepens and he slows the car a little. "You've got a headache, right?" and oh. *Oh*.

"How do you know that?" Will asks instead, defensiveness edging into his voice. He mentally curses himself out for running the brief casualness of the two of them, together and alone.

Mike doesn't seem hurt by the vicious tone and instead just says, "you have this funny sort of pained expression." He mimics Will's face perfectly, contorted in mock-pain that makes the corners of Will's lips curl.

"Maybe that's how I always look," he says curtly, folding his arms across his chest so he has something to do with them.

Mike lets go of the steering wheel with one hand to wave him off, "no, normally you just look confused. Your nose is scrunching up right now. You look like a kitten." He mimics Will again and then laughs. Will tries for a scowl but finds himself grinning too hard to muster any kind of hurt.

He settles on, "fuck off" instead.

He turns to glance the window, but can feel Mike's eyes trained on

the side of his head. "What?" he gives in, with an irritated sigh. Really, he's just curious about the way Mike is watching him.

"It's weird. Hearing you swear. It looks odd on you." Mike says, like it's that simple. Like the last time they talked wasn't in middle school, at Will's locker, just before the worst day of his life.

Mike had always been the talker, anyway. Will was much better at listening.

He locates the pills in the glovebox and swallows them dry, like he's gotten good at doing. Mike doesn't even blink, concentrating fully on the road that stretches out in front of them.

---

Will doesn't want to get out when they reach his house.

It looks cold, dark, all lights switched off and driveway empty. normally he would relish being home alone. Tonight, though he craves the warmth of Mike's heated car and his undivided attention.

Mike doesn't move either. He's been picking at the sleeve off his jacket for a few minutes, casting occasional glances out the window, as though checking someone hasn't snuck up on the two of them.

The radio crackles impatiently. Will breathes in. Opens his mouth to say something. Exhales.

Mike speaks for him instead. He hacks out an uncomfortable cough, then all at once says, "I'll pick you up tomorrow morning."

"You don't have to," Will is protesting. He doesn't want to be Mike's obligation. He doesn't know quite what he wants to be to Mike, just that he doesn't want his pity.

Mike forces himself to smile. It looks like it takes effort, like his face aches with the weight of it. "I know," he shrugs, focusing his gaze on Will's. Then, with more forcible joviality, "how else are you gonna

get to school?”

Will reels at the insinuation and is tugging open the door to get away from Mike's coy smile. "Jonathan could take me," he says as he struggles with his bag. He finally manages to yank it free from the cars floor and wraps his arms securely around it.

"Will," Mike protests firmly, leaning slightly out his seat so that he can properly see him. "It's no trouble. Really."

He wants to protest. Wants to put up a fight, demand he can do it alone, he can do everything alone, he doesn't need Mike Wheeler anymore.

It's a lie. Everything he's tried to do without Mike has ended in flames.

"As long as you don't mind picking up El too," he says with a shrug.

He's so fucked.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

An update? From me? Seems unlikely.

Here you go!! Sorry for the delay, life has been hectic and I actually had this chapter planned out long before I got out my laptop to write it. I've actually been devoting most of my writing time to a longer one-shot thing for a different fandom and it's taking more time than expected. Hopefully when that is finished I can dedicate more time back to this fic!!

Thanks if you're still here and reading!! It honestly means so much to me!!

## 10. Chapter 10

### Summary for the Chapter:

"Will is used to having strange dreams. Nightmares, most of the time. Twisting spectres and bone-chilling, make-up smeared clown faces that trail into a gush of blood. Just bizarre dreams about El having powers, and Lucas riding a Pegasus, and those falling dreams that make your stomach drop.

Mike, sat at his kitchen table, politely eating a plate of eggs is the weirdest dream of them all."

"Uh, thank you, Mrs Byers-"

"Joyce, honey, seriously."

"Sorry, Mrs- Joyce. Thank you, uh, again."

Will is used to having strange dreams. Nightmares, most of the time. Twisting spectres and bone-chilling, make-up smeared clown faces that trail into a gush of blood. Just bizarre dreams about El having powers, and Lucas riding a Pegasus, and those falling dreams that make your stomach drop.

Mike, sat at his kitchen table, politely eating a plate of eggs is the weirdest dream of them all.

Will rubs at his eyes, but the image does not fade. Rationally, he knows it's real. That Mike had insisted on picking him up this morning, his first morning sans car (he told his mom last night about the dodgy engine), but it still doesn't sit quite right. He thought maybe Mike would forget. Not turn up.

He certainly didn't expect Mike to knock on the door and take the breakfast offered. He's too tall for the chair, legs hanging over the side, carefully shovelling the eggs and toast into his mouth. He doesn't look at all out of place, which Will supposes he isn't; he's sat at this table enough over the years, smiling the same way at Will's

mom, eating the same eggs, fielding the same questions.

‘Yes, school is fine. Yes, my parents are well. Yes, it does feel cold today.’

Will’s dressed and ready to go, but somehow he feels exposed and out of place, hovering in the doorway to his own kitchen. No one has seen him yet. He could just sneak back to bed, or maybe climb out of the bathroom window.

“You know,” a soft voice says from behind him. He flinches involuntarily at the sound, bumping his shoulder against Jonathan’s chest. He’s still wearing his pyjama’s, toothbrush dangling from his mouth. “When you told me a friend was picking you up, I really didn’t expect it to be Mike fucking Wheeler.”

Will scoffs, which makes his brother laugh too, a small chuckle escaping his lips. He presses his weight against the doorway and says nothing, just watches as Mike reaches out for the jug of orange juice.

(“These eggs are lovely, M- Joyce.”

“Unfortunately I can’t take credit for them, they’re Jonathan’s speciality.”)

“You’re just jealous he didn’t bring Nancy,” Will retorts, and the small snort of indignation he receives in return makes him grin. Jonathan’s hand seeks his hair, but he ducks, weaving under his older brother’s and instead throwing himself fully into the kitchen.

He can hear the squeak of a chair as Mike shifts his weight to look at him. He’s too big for the chair, for the table, for the Byers house, for Will. He practically spills out, arm thrown over the chairs back as it creaks under the pressure.

His mumbled “hey” is lost as his mom scoops forward, gently smoothing his clothes. “There he is. Thought you were still asleep.” She pats anxiously at his hair, as though her touch will fix the mess it is currently. He wants to tell her to back off, that he’s not six, but that in itself sounds childish. Instead he settles for reaching around her and for the coffee jug. She watches him disapprovingly but says

nothing.

Mike doesn't say anything either. His eyes follow Will, mouth tilted slightly. Will can feel the eyes on his back as he focuses on the window, and on his scalding cup of coffee.

"Did you sleep well?" Mike asks, with a weight that suggests her really wants to know the answer. Will turns around and leans back against the counter.

"I guess," is there a correct answer to that question, he wonders? Maybe the truth, but that's too awful to tell – No, Mike, I spent most of the night sat on my window drawing you, again and again. there's a whole sketch pad of just you, do you want to see?

He doesn't hear Jonathan enter but he feels his presence as he clears the table and places the dishes in the sink for later. He can hear his mom humming, hunting for something just off in their lounge. He can't hear Mike.

"Thanks for the eggs," he's saying to Jonathan, smiling with a genuine gratitude. He makes a move to stand up, plate in hand, but Will finds himself tearing it from his grasp. Their fingers brush together slightly, and Will feels the heat in the back of his neck. Mike shifts in his seat.

Jonathan's not saying anything. He's working on the juice now, slotting it back into the fridge, back turned in a way that means he can't see either of them.

"They were really nice," he tries again. still, no answer. For the first time this morning, Mike looks uncomfortable in the chair. He pushes himself up, wringing his hands, eyes skirting, looking for a clock.

Jonathan's shoulders are set, and when he turns, Will can see the shadow of something in his eyes. He's still holding the juice, fridge door slightly ajar, as he shrugs and murmurs, "they were meant for Will."

"I didn't want them anyway," Will says too quickly, which is the truth, but decidedly the wrong thing to say. Both Mike and Jonathan



are frowning at him, deep, concerned frowns creasing their faces.

“I’m... sorry?” Mike is saying, hurt etched in his face, but it doesn’t matter because Jonathan’s back is already turned, back to the fridge. Mike looks at him helplessly, but Will doesn’t know what to say. Mike’s not used to this; not used to people being so hostile. Will’s not used to Jonathan being like this, and he has a sudden desire to shake his shoulders and ask him why he chose now to be a douche.

But more than anything, he wants out the house, and into the safe – safe? – confines of Mike’s car. “Forget it,” he mutters, and in a moment of bravery, takes hold of Mike’s forearm, leading him out of the house.

“Thank you, Mrs Byers!” Mike manages to shout over his shoulder as Will practically wrestles him out of the house. The door closes before they hear her answer.

---

“What’s wrong with your brother?”

They’ve been driving for a while. Mike’s car is nicer than Will’s – more space, cleaner, and with an engine that doesn’t rattle. Mike’s careful with it (“Her, Will. It’s a girl.”) too, gently easing it around corners and over potholes. There are no wrappers in the backseats, no lost school work down the side of the door. The radio is blaring tinny pop that makes Will wish for just one of his cassettes. It’s nice.

It’s uncomfortable.

He’s leaning towards the window, legs pressed against the door. He’s avoiding looking at Mike, who looks so cute when he’s driving. His knee bounces involuntarily and he leans towards the round, carefully deliberating each turn. It shouldn’t captivate Will as much as it does, so he forces himself to look away.

He barely registers the question at first. He can feel Mike’s eyes shifting between him and the road, expectantly waiting for an

answer, so he shrugs half-heartedly. He doesn't know what's wrong with Jonathan. There were plenty of eggs for everyone. Even if there weren't, Will would gladly give his eggs to Mike. That's what friends do, right? Not that either Byer's sibling would know.

"Your mom hasn't changed at all," Mike continues, when he realises Will isn't going to answer. He's always been good at that. Filling in the gaps. Covering for Will when he just doesn't have the energy to be a person. "I missed her calling me honey."

"We can do a trade if you want," Will suggest wryly. Mike chuckles. It's officially the best joke Will's ever made. "Swap families for a bit."

"And live with Jonathan? He hates me."

"He doesn't hate you," Will protests, even though it's probably true. Jonathan hates a lot of people. It's dad's fault really. Maybe Will's too. He doesn't hate Mike though, he can't hate Mike, not the little boy who was practically his second brother.

Mike rolls his eyes and presses his hands tighter to the steering wheel, but doesn't argue.

"I could live with Nancy, I think," Will muses, which makes Mike snort. He didn't mean it like that, and tells Mike as such.

"No, no, she's nice, and- sure, yeah, she's pretty, but I'm not-"

Into girls? It would be so easy to admit that, in the front seat of Mike's car. Admit that he's in love with a different Wheeler all together, and burn these bridges before they're even rebuilt. So easy to just lean forward and kiss him. So easy to let the world know he's gay.

"- I just think she'd be a good listener," he finishes pathetically, heart racing because he's got away with it, heart sinking because he's a coward.

Mike doesn't notice. "She's not even around much, anyway. You'd be putting up with Holly instead."

"Isn't she in middle school now?"

“Yep.”

“Okay, pass.”

They're pulling up next to El's house now. She's already waiting outside, bundled in a too-big jacket that Will recognises, legs bare and buckling against the wind. She doesn't falter at the sight of Mike's car – Will told her last night, so all teasing was done with. She just grins and waves through hair which mattes in her face.

She heads for the backseat and Will regrets his choice to sit in the front. She shouldn't be pushed back there, he should. It feels all wrong in the front, with Mike's head lolling in his direction, his eyes straining to look at the girl he should be with.

El clambers in the back, leaning forward temporarily to press the thermos into Will's hand.

“Coffee?” he questions as she fumbles with her seatbelt, clicking it securely into place.

“Tea,” she answers, straining forward to retrieve it from him after he takes a sip. He's never been fond of tea, and this is sweetened to an inch of its life.

“Can I have some?” Mike asks.

Will grimaces and shakes his head, murmuring “you don't want to” as El says “sure!”

It feels awkward at first. Mike is driving smoothly, and El is sat forward in her seat, arms resting on Will's legs. The morning car ride is theirs, a free space to discuss whatever, to be whatever, but now there's someone else in the space, observing.

“Any news?” El asks, and Will tells her no without even asking what about. NYU is the dark shadow that hangs over him, haunting his nightmares, both asleep and awake.

“You?” he returns; to which she just shrugs. He gets it.

“What about you, Wheeler?” she turns her attention to him, hand

pressed under her chin almost thoughtfully.

“Don’t call me Wheeler,” he groans, pressing his hand to his head before returning it to the steering wheel. “Only people I don’t like call me Wheeler.”

“That’s what Max’s calls you.”

“Exactly,” Mike says, but he’s grinning, eyes flitting to Will and holding there. He’d forgotten the power of that smile. God damn, that smile.

“Okay, Mike,” she tries again, flopping back against the backseats, legs splayed. “Have you heard from any college’s yet?”

He just shrugs, pressing his head against the headrest with an admirable ease. “Who cares? If they want me, they want me, and if not... well, that’s a separate adventure. College isn’t everything, you know. That’s just what teachers and parents tell us so we work hard. Life is about much more than some score on a piece of paper.”

“Easy for you to say. Bet you’ve already been accepted,” El mutters darkly, to which Mike just laughs.

Will can feel himself grinning, and instead forces himself to look out the window, away from Mike and into the dead air of Hawkins.

A separate adventure. He’d looked pleased when he said that, almost wistful at the prospect of being rejected from college. Mike, who runs track. Mike, who is on the honour roll. Mike, friends with the student president. Yet not caring for any of that. Yearning instead, for a different adventure, for a life away from numbers and ordered lists.

Maybe that’s what Will wants, too. He wants it if Mike wants it. He wants Mike’s hand slotted in his, and the cool air of somewhere on the coast. Forgiveness. Acceptance.

No. He wants to never leave this car, never to arrive at their destination. He wants to keep drinking El’s shitty tea and listening to the bad music, and to talk about life as though it doesn’t matter. He wants his best friend’s hands on his legs, and Mike’s on the steering wheel, and he wants to feel this okay forever.

“This is some crappy music, Mike.”

Yes. He wants this.

---

Mike tells him he'll wait for him after school and give him a lift home. Will tells him no, that's stupid. He tells him he has extra classes, that he'll just call Jonathan, or walk. But Mike is stubborn, and clever, and in track so he'll be there late anyway. They finish at the same time, he says.

Lucas offers him a lift after school, says him and El have a student parliament thing so will be in late anyway, but Will declines. He feels a giddy rush doing it, eyes glancing over to where Mike is sat in the cafeteria. If Lucas notices, he doesn't say anything.

So Will waits by Mike's car after class. He's careful not to lean on the bonnet, not to dent anything, not to make himself a presence in Mike's life permanently, because there's no way Mike deserves that.

He's sweaty, Will notices, as he approaches the car. He's sheening with sweat, and he looks slightly uncomfortable – annoyed, maybe? Will's seen the emotion of Max's face before, and he recognises it from Jonathan's eyes this morning. He's lugging his sports kit, eyes overcast in a way Will has never seen in him before. Then again, it's been a long time since they were this close, and this often.

---

“How was practise?” Will asks as they're driving, almost tentatively. Mike doesn't answer him.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Sorry this ends so abruptly, I promise I will resolve

this 'cliffhanger' (?) soon!!

I hope everyone's had a happy holiday!! I've mainly been with my family, and today is my only free day before back to work and then News Years, so I thought I'd get a chapter in. We're halfway through!! I'm so excited for where this story is going, and writing more Will and Mike, as well as more of my fav power trio!! Also more Nancy, as promised, and Jonathan getting his own arc. It should be fun!!

Ps; Mike Wheeler is anti-establishment, pass it on.

## 11. Chapter 11

*There's mud streaked across his cheeks.*

*He's never been a fan of the deep, earthy scent of playing savage, but he's always been a fan of Mike, and the light way his fingertips had danced across Will's face as he smeared it there.*

*"Keep still," Mike had murmured, eyes downturned in concentration. For some reason, Will can't. He shifts, legs twitching beneath him, back pressed against the wall of the fort.*

*"Keep still," Mike repeats, surging forward, jabbing fingers pinning Will down, swiping furiously at his skin, lines of dirt trailing down like they've been rained on. Will sucks in a breath and tries not to move. Mike keeps working, strokes gradually becoming softer until he rocks back on his heels, eyes tracing over Will's face.*

*Will feels his skin heating, as his hand cautiously flits up to wipe off the mud. Mike seizes his wrist, holding it back. Even pouting, he holds a command Will can't ignore, so he stops.*

Will reaches for the heat of the shower and turns it up, as though trying to wash the dirt from his skin, or trying to sear the memory from his mind. He hasn't thought about that day in so long- Mike had been so determined back then, the leader of their games, And Will always willing to follow. He can still smell the ashen, earthy scent of the dirt, can feel Mike's vice like grip.

The memory is half-remembered, like a dream fast fading. He can't remember whether he did wipe the dirt off, or if Dustin and Lucas were there too. It's foggy, a haze-like memory, fading quickly from view.

He finishes showering just as the memory slips fully away from him and leaves him feeling cold, and half-empty.

---

Mike is waiting outside. Will can't see him, but he can see his car, pulled up behind the two cars that now fill their driveway. Will's is just a husk – the mechanic had told them it was junk, practically unfixable and not worth anything but scrap metal. Still, Jonathan had insisted he could fix it, so now it sits on their drive, unloved and neglected, half-blocking the way.

Will makes a beeline for the kitchen table, stopping only to kiss him mom and offer a cheerful “morning”. She proffers a plate of toast to him, of which he takes two slices; gifts, for his carpool buddies. She's saying something Will doesn't register as he stops at the fridge, extracting a carton of juice and last night's lasagne, tucking them safely into his bag. He's pretty sure it's about working late, so he nods and makes affirmation noises until she stands with a sigh, stopping his movements by gripping his face in her hands.

“Stop growing,” she whines, eyes fond, as she rubs his cheeks with her thumbs. “You're two foot taller than me. Who knew I'd have such tall, grown-up boys?”

Jonathan chuckles at that as he enters the kitchen. He's dressed for work, but holding a screwdriver, an implement that looks foreign in his hands, despite how many times Will has seen him use it. His appearance makes their mom relent, dropping Will's face from her vice-like grip and instead straining to wrap her arms around his brother's neck. She attempts to drag him down to her height as Jonathan bats her away, laughing about how he's “gonna be late, seriously, I gotta go”.

Will tries to use her moment of distraction to sneak towards the front door, but he's caught red-handed. She jabs a finger in his direction and he puts his hands up in mock surrender, which makes Jonathan smirk at him.

“Hey, not so fast you. Did you hear what I said?” She asks, reaching forward to straighten out his shirt. It's an old navy one he can't remember ever buying, but it fits well, even if it is crumpled beyond saving. Maybe it belonged to Jonathan? He doesn't know.



He hazards a guess – “You’re gonna be working late?” – which makes her laugh and roll her eyes with an irritated fondness.

“Do you remember when you used to listen to me? Both of you? What times they were?” she laments jokingly, moving past Will to scoop up plates and dispose of them in the sink. It’s odd, the three of them joking again, laughing again- almost like a real family.

“Hey, I listen,” Jonathan protests, swiping a piece of toast from the table and eating it standing up. “She’s going on a date with the chief,” Jonathan informs Will, taking a few stumbling steps backwards when their mom turns on him.

“I am not!” she says at the same time as Will mutters “about time,” causing her to turn accusingly to him instead. Will ducks playfully, but she just reaches out to scrubs his hair. He doesn’t manage to evade her seeking hand, but tries instead to bat her away.

“It’s not a date,” she protests, but it sounds feeble to Will. “Just two friends swapping parenting tips. Jonathan, will you look after Will?”

“I don’t need looking after-”

“And Will,” she adds, hands trailing to his shoulders instead, holding him in place like she did on his first day of high school. “Look after Jonathan.”

He nods an affirmative as their mom ducks into the bathroom, which makes Jonathan shoot a scowl at him. It’s harmless though, lacking any malice. Not like the look Jonathan had given Mike. Mike, who waits outside in the car now to avoid Jonathan. He came in again once, the day after the first time he’d picked Will up. By the time Will had emerged from his room, the air was icy, and Mike seemed to be looking mainly at the floor. Jonathan had been leant against the counter, fingers tapping the surface impatiently.

“There he is,” he had said, tone light but eyes overcast. Mike hadn’t come back in since.

Will has already yanked the door open when Jonathan’s voice stops him.

"I could give you a lift, you know," he says, so softly Will wonders if he imagined it.

"Huh?" he responds eloquently, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He can feel Mike watching from the car, even if he can't see him, and so much of him itches to be there next to him, by his side.

"I'm just saying," Jonathan continues. He looks uncomfortable, picking at the crust of his toast which Will notices is burnt. "You don't have to put up with Mike Wheeler."

Will bites his lip to stop himself from blurting out that he wants to put up with Mike Wheeler, forever if he can. Instead he shrugs, "He's my friend, I don't just put up with him."

Jonathan scoffs, taking a step forward and Will has never felt so intimidated by his brother. They're the same height now, but Jonathan holds an authority Will can't, never will hold. It reminds him a little of their dad, but mostly of Chief Hopper, with his hands on his hips.

"He's not your friend, Will. Friends don't treat you that way."

"He's not treated me any way," Will protests, throat thick. It's true. Mike has been nothing but kind to Will. He's not the bad guy here. Why can't Jonathan see that.

"He abandoned you," Jonathan's voice is dry now, any trace of humour gone. Will wants his mom to charge out the bathroom and tell him to stop. He wants to be in Mike's car, away from this bullshit.

But no one is coming to Will's rescue. He's not a damsel in distress, not a princess from a fairy tale. He's not a child hiding behind his mother's legs, and he's certainly not Jonathan's little brother anymore.

So he takes the matter into his own hands.

"Will you get off my back? I'm not a fucking child. Get out of my business," he hisses, voice oddly steady as he starts down the porch steps and throws himself into the passenger seat of Mike's car.

"You okay?" Mike asks distantly, leaning towards Will with a careful concern. Will can hear the voice swimming in his ears, feel his own breath in his head, but still he nods.

He's fine.

He's never fought with his brother before. Not through all of this. Never.

He's fine.

"I'm fine."

---

He doesn't talk to Jonathan for the next few days. Nothing more than pleasantries, a simple "pass the milk" or "are you using the bathroom?" If their mom notices, she doesn't mention it. She's still high from her not-date-date, a simple Italian that seems to have made her feel more joyful than ever. She hasn't mentioned another date yet, but Will is certain one will appear in her calendar soon. He's not sure how he feels about the idea of his mom and the chief. He guesses he should feel happy about the idea of El as a potential step-sister, but mostly he already feels mournful of his tight little family unit which is already unravelling in his fingers.

It's odd, not talking to Jonathan. He's used to the two of them being close, functioning intrinsically in a way people don't even seem to realise. Without his brother, he feels disjointed. He makes himself breakfast. He watches old tapes of horror movies alone. He feels like a half of him is missing.

He'd apologise too, if he had anything to apologise for. But he doesn't. Jonathan was out of line, attacking Mike as though he's capable of making mistakes.

He tells El this, as they watch scream for the fifth time in her house,

sprawled across the sofa.

“He’s probably just concerned?” she suggests around a mouthful of popcorn. “He’s looking out for you.”

“Well, he could do it without taking it out on me,” Will replies. El snorts, but says nothing.

---

He learns a lot about Mike in a short space of time. It’s the proximity, he assumes, or maybe the effect of two friends drifting back together after so long. Will finds himself trying to keep the things straight in his mind, and instead sorts them into a list which he christens his Mike List. He keeps it in his algebra notebook.

Mike is surprisingly soft. Will doesn’t know what he expected, really. His memories of Mike when he was younger were brash and bossy, the leader of their little party. He remembers Mike screaming at his mom when she disrupted their games, remembers the harshness of his ‘play-fights’ with Lucas, the righteousness of the way he acted because he was always right. He remembers the strong-willed, persistent and principled Mike, remembers the softness being an afterthought, the way his voice turned when Will’s face would droop.

Nothing prepares him for the new, gentle Mike. The one who asks “are you okay?” every morning, eyes fixed on Will before he even thinks about driving. The Mike who gently reaches to the backseat to readjust El’s collar when she buttons it in a rush. The Mike who learns of their coffee tradition and starts bringing an extra thermos for them all to share.

Mike doesn’t plan. Will is used to the trial of campaigns, the dedicated way Mike would methodically work through his physics homework, or intrinsically schedule his days. Mike trademarked the phrase “organised fun” when they were nine, so alike to his mother

in the way he would organise himself, and, by effect, Will.

The new Mike doesn't plan. Not for his day, or his future. When Will tries probing him about colleges, and application dates – cautiously, and mostly to soothe his own worrying – all he receives in return is a shrug.

“Who cares?” Mike had said, a secret smile spreading across his face. “Who needs college? I have the whole world, and I’m not planning on wasting it doing what adults suffering mid-life crisis’ want me to do.”

Will admired that, but El had been appalled when she found out. She insisted that he fill out the applications, just in case, which had made Mike roll his eyes and shoot Will a look. Will wishes he was brave enough to follow after Mike. He certainly knows he's stupid enough.

Mike takes medication. A lot of it.

Will always thought he was the proud owner of the most orange cylinder, but Mike's glove compartment puts him to shame. It's lined with the small bottles, plastered with names Will can't pronounce and won't try to. He can discern some of them from his own medicine cupboard, but others he can't recognise.

“Most are for track,” Mike explains when he fishes around for nurofen one day. “I get aches. Head, chest, leg, you name it. Teeth, that's the worst. How do you get toothache from running?”

“The cold?” Will guesses. He doesn't know. Mike had always been their leading scientist, but now that mantel falls to Dustin.

Mike shrugs, and swallows the pill dry with a composed ease.

There are ones he takes every morning. Thick, weighty pills, blue and red, capsules that make Will feel sick just with a glance.

“Beta blockers,” Mike had explained the first time he emptied two into his hand. Will had just nodded. He hadn't asked what they were for. He wanted to know what they were for.

Mike-

“Will the Wise!”

Will's stood by his locker. He doesn't like it, doesn't enjoy the pulsating rhythm of the corridor. Most of the time, he barely even comes here, and he certainly doesn't like to loiter. At the beginning of the year he was leaving his books in his car, but now he's a guest in someone else's vehicle and increased workload means having to use his locker. It's dreary, grey and undecorated, just a few hallways away from the cafeteria. It's also two down from Dustin's locker, which is covered with faded stickers and stuffed full of scrap papers.

“Stop calling me that,” he returns, slipping the notebook inside, closing the locker door and looking at his friend for the first time. He's not wearing a hat, unlike usual, but his hair is pulled tightly into two small bunches which sit on the top of his hair. He should look ridiculous, but for some reason it suits him. “El?”

Dustin nods in response, hand trailing over the tufts of hair, almost self-conscious for a second. “She's practising.”

“I'd say she's pretty good already,” Will comments. Dustin is fiddling with his lock, and finally nudges the locker door open, an avalanche of what looks like blueprints and translation notes falling onto him. He shoves them back in, and instead retrieves a pack of batteries, which he slips into his coat pocket. Will pretends he doesn't notice.

“Want to hear my next escapade?” Dustin asks Will eagerly, as the other boy presses his shoulder against his locker.

“Sure,” Will shrugs. It's lunch, and even if it wasn't, he'd always have time for Dustin. “It's not studying for finals, is it?”

He casts a look up the corridor, then tilts his head towards Will, and excitedly murmurs, “I'm going to impeach Lucas”

Will's not sure he's heard right. He leans back slightly, brows

furrowed, focusing on the way Dustin shifts with anticipation. "I'm sorry, what-"

"I'm gonna impeach him."

"Like Nixon?"

"Yes. No. More successfully. Like Andrew Johnson."

"I don't think you can impeach school presidents..." Will tries, but Dustin is already shaking his head and slinging an arm over Will's shoulder.

"No one's tried it yet. I'll be the first to try," he insists, starting towards the cafeteria and dragging Will along with him.

Will wants to protest, wants to insist that Lucas is their friend and a good president, but the idea of an attempted impeachment sounds too exciting to dismiss, even if the targeted candidate is his friend since elementary school.

"They've got to have some sort of constitution to be a governing body," Dustin is saying, mainly to himself. "I'm sure he's violated that plenty of times."

"Why don't you just ask El?" Will asks, but Dustin shakes his head solemnly.

"She'd never betray her own cabinet," he says mournfully.

They reach the cafeteria and Will is abandoned in favour of cafeteria pizza. He makes his way to their table alone, marvelling at the fact that no one even tries to stop him, or point out that he's out of place. He slumps into a seat between El, who buries her face in his neck, and Lucas, who is engaged in a heated debate about something with Max. When he tries to ask El what they're on about, she just shrugs and slides half her lunch towards him. In return he proffers out a half-stale quiche, which she takes eagerly.

His mom always says that what goes down must go back up again. That thought has never felt so right.

He picks up the sandwich offered by El, takes a bite, and tries not to focus on the vacant seat opposite him.

Halfway Happy.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I feel like this is the halfway point, which is why the conflicts/friendships seemed to have reached a sort of peak. Things only get messier from here folks!!

Jonathan's character in this story is so interesting to write, and he's getting a full arc in the remaining ten chapters.

Honestly, I was feeling sort of at my peak with this story; I wasn't content with what I was writing, and I felt like most people had stopped reading. To all the people who commented, you really kept me going when I felt like just dropping off. It's thanks to you that this chapter exists, and that I wrote something I'm proud of.

Please, please, keep commenting, keep theorising and keep critiquing!! It's what keeps us writing!!

This chapter is dedicated to Mozbee: your lovely, kind words inspired me to open my laptop again and I feel grateful.



## 12. Chapter 12

### Summary for the Chapter:

Will barely hears him at first, his voice is so quiet and measured. He turns to look at Mike, lowering his hands to the thermos and taking a small sip. Mike must realise he hasn't heard, or registered the question, because he repeats it, voice dangerously low and dropping off on the last syllable.

"How's Jonathan?"

"How's Jonathan?"

They're on their way to school, the three of them crammed into Mike's overheating car. The windows are fogged from the heat of three bodies, and from the steaming thermos of tea that is currently wedged between Will's legs. He's being staring out the window for the past ten minutes, scenery dancing, whilst Mike drives in his peripheral, focused in concentration, humming under his breath. El is doing homework on the backseats, legs propped up despite Mike's persistence that they have to take care of the car, like they would an animal. El had snorted when he first said it, but now Will notices her wipe her feet gently before getting in.

Will barely hears him at first, his voice is so quiet and measured. He turns to look at Mike, lowering his hands to the thermos and taking a small sip. Mike must realise he hasn't heard, or registered the question, because he repeats it, voice dangerously low and dropping off on the last syllable.

"How's Jonathan?"

Will ventures a look into the backseat but El is still furiously scribbling, body bent over her books in concentration. She either didn't hear, or she doesn't want to. He doesn't know why, but he can't bring himself to mention the conversation with Jonathan on the porch to her, which is odd because she must know; there's no secret mom can keep from the chief, and thus non Will can keep from El.

Not that he often wants to keep secrets from her.

Still, the only person he told about Jonathan and his fight was Mike, and even then it was a heavily doctored version to remove Mike's involvement.

Will finds his fingers tracing the top of the thermos gently, watching the soothing rhythm instead of looking at Mike. "Odd. He's been very quiet."

He feels Mike shift, feels the air around them change in the car. "He's still not talking to you?"

Will nods, because it's half-true. Jonathan's not talking to him, but Will's maintaining the silence too. It's weird, because he can't remember ever not speaking to Jonathan, not for longer than a few hours. It's weird, because somehow it doesn't feel like he's missing half himself, and that he can still breathe on his own.

Mike exhales, softly but kindly, and Will dares to look up. The first thing he sees is a slant of light grazing Mike's cheekbone. He looks away again, this time out the window.

"You two were always so close. Can't imagine you not talking." Mike says, almost inaudibly. Will finds himself leaning closer to listen, and in doing so brushes his shoulder against Mike's gently. If he notices, he doesn't react.

He laughs though, light and airy, and his eyes shift off the road momentarily, flickering to Will's own. "Then again, I couldn't imagine us not talking."

Will simultaneously sinks and stiffens, frozen in his seat as Mike reaches for the gears with ease. He smiles at Will, a brief passing as he refocuses on the road. Will can't look away, but forces himself to focus on the window, forces himself to blink like a normal human, to swallow and laugh and dare to look at Mike.

The light is back, this time highlighting the exposed skin on his neck, which fades into the letterman jacket. He looks like an angel, Will thinks, resisting the urge to reach forward and graze the bare skin

with his fingertips.

“Nancy’s back,” Mike says suddenly, fingers nails digging into the worn steering wheel, eyes occasionally slanting towards Will. “We could set them up on a date, if you wanted to get him out of your hair.”

Will grimaces, and laughs, easily this time. It’s always easy with Mike, once he figures out how to breathe around him.

He feels fingers curl around the fabric of his shirt and meets the eyes of El, leant forward in her seat and frowning. “What are you two whispering about?” She asks accusingly, but her eyes are soft and her fingers gentle on Will’s shoulder.

“Nothing,” Mike chirps innocently, looking straight past El to smirk at Will, and to wink.

Actually wink.

Will feels his soul drop out of his body right then and there.

---

“Why do you hate him?”

He’s sat in American Literature with Max, during fourth period on Wednesday. They’re meant to be doing partner work deciphering Steinbeck’s upbringing, but Max has spent most of the lesson with her chair tilted against the wall, drawing on the side of the desk. How she’s passing the class, Will doesn’t know.

Everyone else is working, or not working, in isolation, and no one is listening to the two of them who have been bickering at the back of class for the last fifteen minutes. Max had wanted to focus on the racist implications of *Of Mice and Men* but Will said, screw that, and he’s the only one actually doing the work, so he has final say. He’s doing a collage.

He doesn't know where the question comes from. He's always had the desire to ask Max, but never has he had the guts. Not when they're alone, and certainly not in a group. They may be friends, but she's vaguely terrifying and self-righteous.

Right now she just looks confused, tilting her chair forward and firmly planting all four legs on the ground. She stops drawing, and uses her pen to gesture to Will's collection of quotes and glue. "Steinbeck?"

Will shakes his head and leans forward to grab another piece of paper, practically attacking it with his scissors. He wants to say forget it, but it's practically out in the open now, with Max's confused expression and his runaway mouth. "Mike," he says simply, focusing on the paper, and not on the way Max shifts in her chair.

"I don't hate Wheeler," she says simply, grabbing a piece of her hair and moving it with ease between her fingers.

Will lowers the paper and watches her over the top of it, cautiously or curiously. She sighs, meeting his eye, and discards the hair too, placing the palms of her hands flat on the desk between them. "I don't hate him, Will."

"You act like it," he says with a shrug, snipping at the paper yet again and then laying it flat on his collage.

"I don't hate him," she leans back again, then forward, then shifts, as though unsure what to do with herself, with all her energy. Almost as though she's nervous at Will confronting her. Which is stupid. Will is scared and cowardly. She is uncontrollable, and aflame, and a damn badass.

"He's just such a jock. He's a dick to everyone, without any consequences. Look at what happened with Jennifer."

"He only broke up with her," Will insists, but Max isn't listening.

"She really liked him, and I know what people say about her but she's actually really nice when you get to know her. And Wheeler-" she practically sneers at his name. "Treated her like she's nothing. He

treats everyone like they're nothing, expect his track bros, and I'm so sick of it."

She drops her hands back down to the desk, from where they've been flying erratically around her head, with a deflated air, eying Will carefully. It's almost as though she's waiting for him to agree.

Instead he shakes his head. "He's not like that."

She laughs, brittle and annoyed, slumping once more back in her seat, reaching for the pen and drawing the beginnings of a flower on the corner of the desk. "Will, he ignored you for years. He treated you like shit."

"So did you."

There's no reply, but her hand falters slightly and she looks up. Will can't meet her eyes, and instead frowns at the paper which he retrieves from the table.

"That's not fair," she says softly. Will stays silent, only reacting when she reaches forward and takes her hands in his. "I'm sorry about middle school, I was young and stupid and fooled by fucking Mike Wheeler and I'm sorry."

Her hands are clammy, Will notices, as she uses them to squeeze his tightly, as though trying to physically wish away middle school and all that came after. He knows he should pull his hands away, take the blame away from her, but instead he finds himself smiling weakly, eyes shifting down to the desk.

She lets go of his hands, and when she laughs it's sounds watery, as though it bubbling in her throat. "Okay, I'll be nice to Wheeler. For you," she adds, almost threateningly, if it weren't for the way she swipes the piece of paper from his grasp. "Now, how about we look instead at Steinbeck's presentation of women?"

Will laughs, and relents, leaning forward in his seat to try and steal the paper back from her.

He feels like he's gained a friend.

---

“You’re impeaching me?”

He’s stood at Dustin’s locker, with Dustin and El. They’re flicking through an apparently rare x-men comic that Dustin scored, the three of them huddled round, Dustin boasting as he points out the discrepancies that make it so unique. El keeps laughing at him, not light and flirty, but deep, with intense feeling. It would be cute, if the way Dustin is beaming at each laugh made him feel like a spare part.

It’s Lucas that interrupts them, slamming his hand against a nearby locker and startling a freshman. “You’re impeaching me?” he asks, sounding equally bewildered and angry. Dustin just grins, slotting the comic back into his locker.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says as he fiddles with the combination, feigned ignorance masked by the smile tugging at his lips.

Lucas practically whines, reaching up to his backpack straps and pulling on them with frustration. “Dustin, what the hell man? Do you even realise how stupid this is? We don’t have a senate!”

“We’ll elect one,” he replies, patting Lucas’ shoulder in a mockery of good nature. Lucas bats him away, ducking under his arm, looking alarmingly like he did when the other would torment them as children. He shoves Dustin, but he just rocks back on his heels and remains upright, still grinning.

Lucas turns to El, pointing accusingly. “You. Did you know about this?”

El, for her part, smiles apologetically. “I did,” she explains, pressing on when Lucas whines again and buries his face in his hands, “I tried to stop him, but he’s an unstoppable force.”

It’s Will’s turn next. Lucas rounds on him, so close they’re almost pressed nose to nose. He looks solemn up close, and tired, not at all

how Will pictures him.

“Will,” he says with a sort of gravitas, “please tell me you didn’t betray me too.”

He sounds so serious, and Will has to fight back a smile, holding his hands up in surrender. “I’m not getting involved.”

“It’s Dustin, you have to get involved,” Lucas insists.

“You’re our responsible one,” Dustin agrees, finally closing his locker door with a delicate thud.

Will shakes his head insistently, but he’s smiling, grinning as he does do. “No, no, I’m not your adult supervision. You’ll have to sort it out yourself.”

Dustin laughs, and so does El, light and airy. Lucas is still scowling as Max slings an arm around his shoulder and presses her face against the nape of his neck. Will didn’t know they were back together. He guesses he does now.

“What’s going on?” she asks curiously when Lucas’ face remains soured.

“Dustin’s impeaching me,” Lucas tries, but she’s already cackling, head thrown back. Her laugh is so infectious and Will finds himself laughing too, and he feels El’s shoulders shake next to him.

“You guys are bad friends,” Lucas persists, but it doesn’t stop them.

“What do you need?” Max asks, to which Dustin shrugs. “An impeachment committee, right? Count me in.”

Lucas rounds on her, “and you’re a bad girlfriend!”

“Guess you’ll have to break up with me then.”

Will finds his eyes drawn away from the crowd, down the corridor, towards the figure watching them. He forgot their lockers were so close; forgot he comes here to get his track kit before a lunchtime meet. He forgot, however temporarily, that Mike Wheeler exists.

He raises his hand in lieu of a wave. Mike does the same. Will can see his mouth pressed into a thin line, but can't tell if his eyes are smiling, or downturned, from this distance. He lowers his hand, and turns to leave. Will doesn't stop watching.

"Who is it?" El asks, softly, hand on his arm.

"Nobody," Will replies.

---

"What are they for?"

He doesn't know where the confidence comes from. He's been like that recently; brave, without reason to be. Maybe the proximity to Mike has made him this way.

So, when he gets into the passenger seat a couple of days later, he finds himself twisting his body to watch as Mike takes the beta blockers, tipping them down his throat and wincing as he swallows.

"What are they for?" he finds himself asking, brows furrowed, watching as Mike secures the screw top.

He seems caught off by the question, and fumbles slightly, eyes firmly fixed on the task at hand. He slots them into the glove compartment in silence, Will's question sitting uncomfortably in the air. He wishes he could take it back, but he can't, so he presses his head against the chair instead.

Mike looks like he's about to start driving, hands clenched around the wheel, but he doesn't move. Instead he stares straight ahead, breaths uneven as though he hadn't imagined the possibility of Will having the guts to ask.

Numbly, he realises they're gonna be late to pick up El, and then late to school. More obviously, he doesn't care.

"Sorry," Mike apologises, and Will hears that his voice is thick, as



though the pill has lodged itself there. “I don’t know how to explain without sounding crazy, I-” He laughs, but it’s empty and humourless. Will isn’t laughing.

Instead, he reaches forward and rests his hands on Mike’s knee. It’s uncomfortable at first, odd, and petrifying, as though Mike is going to scream that there’s a *queer* in his car and throw him out. Will itches to remove his hand but he doesn’t, he keeps it there firmly, reassuringly.

Mike doesn’t react at all. He isn’t sure whether that’s good or bad, but he doesn’t move at all the same. He could speak, but he doesn’t, because in the silence, with his hand on his leg he’s saying everything he needs to.

*“Don’t only boys and girls hold hands?” Will asks, nose scrunched, squinting into the sun. His palm feels warm and sticky encased in Mike’s long, grubby fingers, but he feels safe. Like when his mom holds his hand to cross the road.*

*Mike shakes his head determinedly and squeezes tighter. “No. Best friends hold hands.”*

*“And we’re best friends?”*

*“Obviously.”*

Mike’s voice is stronger when he talks again, composed and calm, with Will’s hand still pressed to his leg.

“I get nervous,” he’s saying, and Will can actually feel him trembling beneath the contact. “Sweaty and clammy, and like I have a heavy cold and can’t breathe through my nose or mouth.”

“Panic attacks,” Will says, because he knows the sticky, sweaty, can’t-breathe feeling well. Has known it as a creeping side effect to his searing darkness, but never on its own.

Mike nods, jerkily. “Yeah, that’s what the doctors said. Mom thought I was dying, and Ted-” it’s Ted, not dad now, Will had quickly learnt. “He thought it was to get out of track.”

He spits the words, and lets his hand fall from the steering wheel dejectedly. “They put me on the beta blockers. They’re not perfect, and sometimes I feel so dizzy and tired, but I can breathe, so I can run and...” he trails off lamely with a small shrug.

“That’s all that matters?” Will supplies.

Mike laughs, a genuine laugh which makes Will smile too. “Fuck, no. Track, I could take that or leave it. but... I like feeling like myself again.”

He reaches down and squeezes the tips of Will’s fingers, so softly it feels like a ghost.

Neither of them mention it.

---

“Is this seat taken?”

Lunch times on Fridays are normally a mammoth affair, with the five of them squashed around on table in the epicentre of the cafeteria. Today is no different. Will’s chair is wedged between El and Lucas, the former of whom is sliding chips across the table to him, whilst Lucas is trying to draft him for the anti-impeachment campaign. Will has a book rested on his lap – A Wizard of Earthsea – but he’s not really reading it, too distracted by the way El is pressed up against Dustin, and how Max keeps aiming slyly for his shins underneath the table.

The question isn’t directed at him, but rather at Max, sat next to the table’s only empty chair. Will glances up and is met with a rather sheepish Mike, clutching his bag and studying Max intently, as though she’s a cat he can’t work out.

Her bag is slung over the chair, alongside her coat. Slowly, slowly, she reaches out and pulls them to the floor in an eerie sort of silence, leaving the seat fully vacant. Mike slides into it awkwardly. He looks out of place on their table, but still he smiles at Will and reaches out

to grasp Lucas' extended hand, as he crows, "Michael!"

"Don't call me that," he smiles as he sits back in his seat. Max is bristling, but silently, so Will kicks her shin to say a silent thank you. She scowls at him.

"Don't you have a meet at lunch?" Dustin asks as Mike unpacks his sandwiches with the air of someone who's never eaten before. El must shoot him a look, because he quickly backtracks. "Not that we don't want you here. It's good to see you, man."

"It really is," El affirms, tone apologetic but smile wide. Mike is staring at his sandwiches, almost dejected. He feels the discomfort in the air, and Will wishes he were sitting next to Mike, so he could put his hand on his leg again, bring back the comfort of the car.

"Can we not make this awkward?" Max, blunt as ever, presses forwards on her elbows which rest on the table. "So what if Mike wants to sit with us instead of his asshole friends? It's not the first time it's happened, so can we all stop acting like aliens just landed and started hatching eggs?"

There is silence, and then Lucas is laughing, nudging Max as she rolls her eyes. El slings an arm around Dustin's shoulder, offering him a chip which he accepts, before preferring it to the rest of the table.

Will, in turn, smiles. At Max, gratefully, so gratefully. Then at his book. Then, at Mike.

Mike, who is staring at his sandwiches with the smallest of grins on his face.

Finally, Will knows how it feels to be content.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Another update!! A little bit of filler, but lots of character bonding. The gang's back together!! Which means it's time to fuck some shit up. Hope everyone is ready for the next chapter, it's one of my favourites yet and I've only just started writing it.

Thank you for all your kind words, they really mean  
the world to me.

## 13. Chapter 13

### Summary for the Chapter:

"Which is why he's back here, in his senior year, standing marooned in the middle of the changing room. Around him, people change out of their clothes and into their kits, boys who know each other, take classes together, fresh-faced freshman and sophomores. He wedges himself onto the end of a row and throws his bag down, already regretting it. Why didn't he just repeat the year? Not that it would make a difference; he'd still have to take gym."

### Notes for the Chapter:

TW; some homophobic slurs used in this chapter, please be careful if that is something that upsets you!!

He hates gym. Always has. The uniform itches, the locker rooms are stuffy, and footballs splinter and crack in his dry hands. He dropped the class as soon as he could, and vowed to never take it again.

The only problem is, when applying to NYU, he had found that gym was still an unqualified credit on his diploma. Somewhere between refusing to attend school and hiding, crouched in the corner of the showers, he had failed the class.

Which is why he's back here, in his senior year, standing marooned in the middle of the changing room. Around him, people change out of their clothes and into their kits, boys who know each other, take classes together, fresh-faced freshman and sophomores. He wedges himself onto the end of a row and throws his bag down, already regretting it. Why didn't he just repeat the year? Not that it would make a difference; he'd still have to take gym.

He cautiously pulls his shirt over his head and lays it down on the bench, reaching for his gym kit. If it's possible, the air gets closer and the noise of the room gets louder, door swinging open on its hinges

as masses of blue and white and yellow bodies fill the space.

Will half-turns, recognising the kit but unable to place it, until he sees him, laughing next to another boy, red in the face and panting. His hair is ruffled, out of place, and Will gets the urge to run his hands through it and soothe it back into place. He doesn't.

Instead, he lifts a hand and holds it awkwardly. Mike sees him, and for a minute he stills, people pushing past him to get to the showers and get changed. Rationally, Will knows Mike has track in the period before this one, but it never clicked that he might see him, in here. Belatedly he realises that he's still topless, still staring at Mike.

Mike smiles a little. Looks like he's going to say something. He doesn't.

He doesn't get the chance. Will feels himself jerk backwards as someone shoulders into him, and he collides with the person behind him. He reaches for his kit, but it's gone, knocked from the bench by the same offender. He bends down to retrieve it, but just as he reaches for it he hears a harsh laugh he recognises.

It's like being hit in the face by the past. He pulls himself back up and comes eye to eye with Troy. They're eye to eye now, since Will has grown since freshman year and Troy decidedly hasn't. He still looks the same, with his beady eyes and his grin, and Will would punch him in the teeth if he had the strength, but he can already feel himself shaking.

"Watch it, fairy," and god, he hasn't changed at all. When did Will get back on his radar? When did he make himself a target again?

"Leave him alone Troy," someone says tiredly, someone in a track uniform Will doesn't recognise, but he feels grateful for this stranger. He would defend himself but he can't speak. What is it about childhood bullies and instantly making you feel so small?

Troy just rounds on his teammate with a sneer. "Defending fags now, Charlie? Wouldn't want that to start spreading."

The stranger – Charlie – backs down, holding his hands up in mock

surrender, and the relief coursing through Will's body is replaced by fresh fear. There's a sacred silence to the locker rooms now, everyone watching but not watching, like a car crash or that time he pummelled Mike in the hallway at Hawkin's middle.

Mike. Will can't see him, but that doesn't stop him looking, straining over his shoulder. He probably already left. Or he doesn't want to risk it all for Will. That's fair. He deserves to be left to Troy, to have his brains beaten it. He deserves it.

"Maybe if you weren't staring at Wheeler, you would know where your shit went, fairy."

Troy saw. Will feels his mouth drying, his heart plummeting. Troy knew then, and he knows now. He knows about Mike, and how hopelessly Will is gone for him. He knows. He knows.

Will looks at the floor to avoid looking at Troy, or for Mike, but he still feels everyone's eyes burning into him, rancid. They know too, now. Know there's a queer in their ranks. The already close room feels like it's closing around him, squeezing him tight, choking the air out of him.

He feels numb as Troy pulls him into the shower, barely even registering the way he hits the wall and slides down onto the floor. He knows it's grimy, dirty, but he doesn't care. He just wants to crawl into bed and forgot that he ever thought he could fit into something. The shower starts, cold water jetting everywhere and people are laughing, but he can't see through the way the water soaks and mattes his hair in front of his eyes.

He doesn't know how long he stays there, on the floor of the locker room showers, but he's sure it's a while. His back throbs and he's shivering. Mike didn't come to his rescue, and he didn't deserve that anyway, but still he wishes for it.

The stranger from earlier – "Charlie, just call me Charlie" – is there, helping him to his feet and offering him a towel. He accepts gratefully and sits shivering on the bench instead. His clothes are next to him, and Charlie is explaining how he's "not a queer, seriously, I'm not" and normally Will would insist he's not either but

he's just so tired.

Charlie leaves. He dresses alone, and joins the rest of them on the pitch. No one says anything.

Later, as sits in the passenger seat of Mike's car, he takes the neurofen Mike offers. If Mike was there when it all happened, he doesn't say anything.

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He's sat in Religious Studies a few days later, the schools official last lesson of the day but for him there's still the last stretch to go, the home stretch of extra classes and then there's his safe haven of the car ride home with Mike. He's always there when Will finishes, insisting that he hasn't been waiting long. Sometimes they talk. More and more recently, Mike has been talking – venting – to him, about track and his dad and how annoying it is to have Nancy home. Mostly Will just nods along until he is dragged into conversation with prompting question. Whatever, it's still his favourite part of the day, even if he does have to talk about himself.

Mike is being more tactile lately; arm squeezes, bumped shoulders, the occasional hug where he squeezes Will until his ribs ache. It explains the sudden re-emergence of Troy, long after Will has dropped off his radar. he's like some bloodhounds who can smell out when he's happy and squashes his dreams. He'll put up with it, though, if it means he gets to stay near Mike and feel his chin pressed against his shoulder.

If Mike saw what happened in the changing room, he hasn't mentioned it, for which Will is grateful. He doesn't know what he'd do if he suddenly lost Mike as a friend again, even if he does deserve. He hasn't seen Troy since, and though most of his gym class won't meet his eye, its fine. He's seen Charlie around, and has nodded a hello on the few occasions they've passed in the hallway. It's bold, but Charlie always nods back too.



He's nearly falling asleep at his desk, face pressed into his palm, head tilted towards the door, one eye on the clock. The RS teacher has always had a hypnotising monotone drawl which seems to lull him to sleep, no matter much caffeine he's practically injected into his bloodstream. He's in the middle of debating Judaism with a persistent girl at the front when a small rap on the door interrupts their conversations. Will barely bothers looking up, lazily lifting his eyes to the clock again, then flicking them back down again as the person outside the door is beckoned inside.

El is red in the face, cheeks pushed out like she's out of breath, eyes scanning the room for something, someone. She settles on Will, and he straightens, pushing himself upright in the chair. There's something off with her eyes, with the way she's shifting her weight between feet, and Will needs some air, because something is wrong.

"Can I help you?" the teacher – why can't Will remember his name? – asks, and El pushes forward towards the front desk. She passes him a piece of paper, saying something so softly that Will can't hear, and then she's shifting again.

The teacher reads, pace incredibly slow, but it doesn't matter because Will knows it's bad news, and that it's for him. He just knows.

Sure enough, the next words from the teacher's mouth are "Will Byers" and he's out his seat, out the door, bag hanging off one shoulder, books left discarded.

El follows, door closing with a soft click. She's not got her bag, Will realise, or her coat. She wraps her hands around herself, as though resisting from hugging him and that's so not like her. "Oh Will..." she whispers, and suddenly his nerves are fucked. He's shifting too, like the floor is lava, his heart in his damn mouth.

"What's happened?" His speech is garbled with nerves and speed as he rocks on his heels. "Are you okay? Is it your dad? My mum? Jonathan?"

Oh god, it can't be Jonathan. Will still hasn't talked to him, after everything he said about Mike, and he'd never forgive himself if something has happened and he was still mad at his brother.

He's spiralling, breath hitching, and El knows this because her hands are on his shoulders, forcing him to stop moving and focus on her instead. She's not all that calming, her lip chewed to pieces and her eyes etched with worry, but her breath is still steady, and it helps.

"Will, stop," she says, with a solemn tone that sounds strange on her. He does stop though, clenching and unclenching his fists to give them something to do. "Everyone's fine."

It's clearly a line, but he nods, and swallows, and tries to believe her.

She tries for a smile which comes out wobbly and slowly lets her hands trail off from his shoulders. They fall limply to her side, seeking the hem of her dress and playing with it in her fingertips. She looks worried in a way Will hasn't seen her look before, and it scares him.

"Did you and Dustin break up?" he ventures, pressing his back against the wall, watching the religious studies teacher through the small sliver of glass in the door.

El blanches, and it startles a laugh out of her. "What? No."

"So you are dating?"

"Will..." her tone sounds pained, so he stops.

"How did you get me out of class?" he tries instead. El is picking at her nails now, like she's in a hurry, but just won't tell him what's wrong.

"Mr Newby gave me a hall pass."

"Newby?" Will says, startled. "As in the principle?" His worry had subsided a little, but it's back in full force now, at the idea of the principle somehow being involved in whatever this is.

El shrugs, eyes on the floor, as though for some reason she can't stand to look at him, which is just so stupid. "Not him, directly."

He uses his foot to push him off the wall, a ball of nervous energy, bubbling and overflowing. "El, can you please tell me what's going

on, I feel like I can't brea-

"Mike got in a fight," she says, rushed and under her breath, and at first Will thinks he misheard her. He doesn't respond, the statement hanging dejectedly in the air, neither wanting to claim it.

He thinks of Mike, covered in blood, On the floor, arms splayed, nose streaming. Curled up in his mom's car, crying his eyes out as he drives away. It's like a sucker punch to the gut, and thinking of it makes his eyes water involuntarily.

El sees and reaches for him, but he moves out of her grip. "What do you mean? He wouldn't do that, he's got scholarships and- El, where is he? Is he okay?"

"Will, it's okay," she's trying to sound soothing but he can't stop pacing, mind racing because why would she be telling him about Mike getting in a fight if he wasn't seriously hurt? Why else would he be pulled out of class?

"No, no, stop saying that," he grits out, turning on her. She shrinks away from him a little. "Did he get jumped? Is he at hospital? Is he okay?"

"He's fine, Will. Not even bleeding," El persists, reaching up again and tracing her hands up and down his arms.

"Then, why- why-" Why is he out here? Why was he called out of class? Why would Mike pick a fight? Why would he throw away any chance at college?

El, with her wide, saucer-eyes, just trails her hand down to his and interlocks them. She squeezes tightly, staring up at him. "I'll explain everything, but we've got to go."

"Where?" Will asks, but they're already walking, him numbly moving along beside El, following her god knows where.

"Mr Newby's office."

---

He sees Max first. She's pacing up and down, hair flying out behind her, a blur of red. Her sneakers keep squeaking on the floor with each turn, and her bag lays discarded at the waiting chairs outside Mr Newby's office. She halts when she sees the two of them, then comes bounding down, be-lining for Will and grabbing his wrists tightly.

"Oh god, why didn't you tell me Wheeler was a badass?" she gushes, shaking him with a vigour that suggests an interrogation. He looks past her and sees Lucas, back pressed to the office wall, and Dustin, sat slumped in a chair. He's nursing his knuckles, blowing on them occasionally as though they're smoking. Neither of them look at him, so he is forced to turn back to an expectant Max.

"What's going on?" he asks, voice sounding smaller than he intended.

Max releases him from her grip and turns instead to El. "You didn't tell him?" her voice is hushed, but laced with slight annoyance.

El smiles apologetically between the two of them. "I told him he got in a fight. I didn't know what else to say."

Max huffs, rounding on Lucas and Dustin, who look up expectantly. Will sees Lucas has a notebook in his grip, and is paused in furious scribbles.

"Either of you two want to explain, seen as you were actually there?" Max snaps, to which Lucas shuffles a little sheepishly. Dustin just shrugs and looks back at his knuckles.

"I thought Mike should explain," El whispers, like Will isn't stood right there, like he can't hear everything.

"You think Mike is in any shape to explain right now?"

"Well, do you want to explain?"

"No, I-"

Annoyed, Will pushes past in search of answers. He slumps down next to Dustin, who barely reacts, just shifts slightly. The vacant seat

next to him is filled by Lucas, who lays back and drags his hands over his face. Will should feel uncomfortable, pressed closely between two bodies, but they're his friends, so he doesn't.

"What happened?" His voice sounds hollow in even his own ears.

Dustin shrugs again, pressing a finger to the skin. Lucas sighs, loud and full-bodied, making up for the quiet. It's weird, Lucas being the loud one next to Dustin, but it's been a weird day.

"He just went psycho, man. Started beating the shit out of them, and yeah, they probably deserved it, but still-" Lucas trails into silence, but he's not said enough.

"Who?" he asks, impatiently.

Lucas looks down at his crossed feet, then up again, to the clock on the opposite wall. "Troy. Remember him? And some other jerks on the track team. They're pieces of shit, all of them- El didn't tell you?"

"No. She didn't," he casts a glance over to where El is still in discussion with Max. It looks heated, but she reminds him of The Chief so much he can't help but smile a little. "Where is he?"

"He's in with Newby now."

"And the others?"

"This is Hawkins. They let them go," Lucas shrugs, tone light but eyes dark. Will knows that look. He's felt that look many times, deep in his soul. It's the Hawkins-is-a-piece-of-shit look.

"What about Mike? What will happen to him?"

"We don't know yet," Dustin says darkly, speaking for the first time since Will arrives. It shocks him, a little, to hear his voice so heavy.

"It's crazy," Lucas says thickly, like he's working around tears lodged in his throat. "He just saw red. You should see Troy's face, it's wrecked. I haven't seen anyone act like that since-"

Me, Will thinks. It's what they're all thinking, really, but none of

them say it. Lucas stops abruptly and closes his mouth, leaving the sentence unfinished in the air. It's Max that calls him away, dragging him into their conversation, and he looks grateful to leave.

Will scoots as close as he can to Dustin without their bodies touching, leaving space for his friend to breathe. He's still staring at his knuckles. Up close, Will can see the rings of purple, the beginnings of a bruise forming.

"You okay?" he asks hesitantly. Dustin pulls his hands away and shoves them into the depths of his pocket. "What happened?" Will tries again.

Dustin shrugs emptily. "Mike got way in over his head. Why pick a fight with half your teammates? Stupid son of a bitch."

"Why... did he?"

Dustin fixes him with a look, eyes scanning in a way that feels a little intrusive, but he doesn't answer the question, just turns to stare at the unmoving door.

"You should get some ice for that hand," he tries instead, but this time he's batted off. "How come you were there? With him, I mean."

"We weren't. We weren't with him; we were just sat on the bleachers. The argument started on the course. He'd already taken Troy down by the time we got there."

"Didn't you try and... stop him?" Will hazards, but Dustin just laughs.

"We did, Will the Wise. Have you ever tried to stop someone when they're like that? I have. Twice now. It's damn near impossible."

He laughs again, a short sad laugh, and Will feels his heart contract a little. He forgot about Dustin, arms under his armpits, lifting him up, kicking and screaming. He'd forgotten hurting his friends, ribs to the face, feet to his shins. How could he forget?

"Dustin?" He asks, a question filled with so many apologies.

"Hmm?"

“Do you know why I’m here?”

“I think you should hear it from Mike.” He says, and that's final. Will nods, and sinks back into his seat, watching the door to Mr Newby's office, waiting for it to open.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Two chapters in a week? How unlike me! This chapter actually got too long so I've split it into two parties. The conversation/explanation between Mike and Willl is in the next half, but for now just enjoy the confusing drama!!

## 14. Chapter 14

### Summary for the Chapter:

"Will shoots him a weak smile, which is returned, but barely. It makes his heart sink. Mike looks different, and distance, and Will wonders if he kept looking how much of himself he'd see in those eyes."

He's ushered into Mr Newby's office after waiting a good twenty minutes. El and Max had finally stopped arguing and slumped into the vacant seats next to them. They probably had classes to go to, but none of them lost, all staring resolutely at the door.

It's Mr Newby's secretary who lets him in, holding the door open. She's got kindly eyes and a soft expression, but her features are pulled tight with the stress of a ruined routine. Will still doesn't know why he's here, why Mike finally snapping and beating the shit out of Troy has anything to do with him.

The office is exactly how he remembered it, wall littered with photos and certificates, desk cluttered with things no one would need. Mr Newby looks more agitated now than he did the last time Will saw him, if that's possible. His eyebrows are drawn together, hands folded and pressed to the desk.

He sees Mike next. He's so pressed against the back of the chair that he didn't even see him at first. He looks paler, more drawn, lip swollen and there's ice pressed to his knuckles but El's right; no blood. Will shoots him a weak smile, which is returned, but barely. It makes his heart sink. Mike looks different, and distance, and Will wonders if he kept looking how much of himself he'd see in those eyes.

"Take a seat, William," Mr Newby says kindly, and Will awkwardly shuffles to the available seat next to Mike. "How are your extra classes going?"

The question is so genuine it catches him off guard. "Good," he nods, to which Mr Newby smiles.



“All on track to graduate?”

“I hope so,” Will mumbles, glancing to his lap, then immediately up again when Mr Newby draws in a quick breath. The small talk seems pointless, when Will thinks glances to his right and catches Mike, staring at him with a certain fixation.

Mr Newby pinches at the bridge of his nose, leaning back into his chair which squeaks with the effort. He looks pained, confused, and more than a little uncomfortable.

“Now, William, I just wanted to let you know, that the school is here for you in any capacity you need, be it social or educational. We’re working towards tougher policy with bullying as a whole, but especially discriminatory bullying,” he says gravely, as Mike sinks further into his chair.

Will isn’t sure what to say. Sure, he’s got shit for being a *queer* or *fairy* before, but not the way Lucas gets treated around Hawkins, by teachers and students alike. He’s not been bullied for years, one incident with Troy barely counts, and he still doesn’t know what it has to do with Mike, and the way he’s shrinking in on himself. Will gets a sudden desire to lace their fingers together. He doesn’t.

“Okay...” he says slowly, glancing between Mike and Mr Newby. “I’m sorry, I don’t really know what’s happening...”

“You know there’s been a fight, don’t you William?” Mr Newby says, voice low as he leans back forward in his chair, a little intimidatingly.

Will nods, because he does know, it’s the only thing he knows. “Yes, I do-”

“And you understand we have no room for physical violence in this school, don’t you?”

“Yes, but I wasn’t actually involved in the fight, I was in RS-”

“Michael says you were involved to a certain extent.”

Will glances to Mike, who seems to curl away from the gaze, body

almost turning in on itself. He looks half of himself, pushed into the chair, avoiding Will's eyes, cheek swollen and red and angry. His voice is barely a murmur when he speaks, words delivered straight to his lap. "Will wasn't involved, I shouldn't have mentioned him. I really didn't think you'd bring him here..."

"Michael says there was an incident in the locker room earlier this semester?" Mr Newby ignores Mike and turns to Will instead.

He feels his cheeks flushing, the heat of them, and finds it's his turn to stare at his lap. "It was nothing," he almost spits, with a venom he didn't know he could feel. He looks up again, to Mr Newby. "Really, it was nothing. I handled it."

A small noise that sounds like a scoff comes from Will's right. Mike is shaking his head, still staring at his lap. Like he doesn't believe Will. It makes his stomach twist. He notices Mike is still wearing his track kit, socks that stop just below the knee and the hideous blue and yellow top. Will wants to grab his shoulders and shake him until he splits open.

"You are aware, William," Mr Newby says, after surveying him for a moment. "That all such incidents should be reported to faculty."

Will starts to nod, because he does know that, it's what he's been told for years. It's Mike that stops him, scoffing again, this time raising his gaze to meet Mr Newby's.

"Bullshit," he half-laughs. Will turns, expecting a reprimand, but nothing comes. Instead Mr Newby just watches him carefully, waiting for him to continue. "Kids get bullied every day here. You do nothing."

"We try our best. Most cases aren't reported." Mr Newby explains, barely reacting to the way Mike spits each word. Will can't stop watching him, wondering where all the anger was bubbling under the surface, wondering why it was brewing in the first place. Mike hasn't been bullied in high school. He was barely even bullied in middle school, aside from a few snide comments and a vicious dumping from a girlfriend. Still, he seems visibly upset, hands clenching around the chair arm, quietly seething.

“And the ones that are? Oh that’s right, you just ignore them.”

“We try our best. Nevertheless, it doesn’t mean you can take the matters into your own hands. The boy’s gums were bleeding. He’ll have to have stitches.”

Mike finally deflates, sagging backwards in the chair with a slow exhale. Will finds himself watching Mike carefully, wondering how the boy who waits for him after school and laughs at his stupid jokes could ever be angry enough to make someone bleed. Wondering what would make him angry enough to do that.

“Was this all... about what happened in the locker room?” Will finds himself asking, voice barely a whisper, eyes boring into the side of Mike’s head. The other boy doesn’t answer, doesn’t turn to face him, just stares resolutely ahead at a class photo from 1957.

Mr Newby drags a hand across his face with a deepened sigh. “You boys go sit outside, and talk this out. God knows you’ll make more sense of it than me. I’ve called your parents in to talk to them, and then they’ll take you home.”

Will is about to protest that he doesn’t need to go home, that nothing happened to him and he has class, but Mike beats him to it, anger reigniting in the pit of his stomach. He leans forward in the chair. “Mr Newby, I have a track meet tonight, you can’t send me home.”

He receives a long look in return. “We’ve discussed this, Mr Wheeler. You’re suspended from track for the foreseeable future. It’s the one condition for allowing you to even continue you in this school.”

Mike doesn’t back down. “But I have a scholarship to UCLA, I won’t meet the requirements without track” and oh, that’s new. Mike, who doesn’t care about college, has a scholarship. Probably always had a scholarship, whilst Will had sighed over NYU. It’s another thing that reminds Will that Mike is a person, fully formed and solid.

“I’m sorry,” Mr Newby is saying, sounding genuinely regretful. “But you’ll have to find another means.”

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He lets the two of them back out into the corridor, Will in front, Mike trailing behind nursing his knuckles and a sour expression. El pulls herself to her feet when she sees him, arms curling around his neck, squeezing him tightly.

“I still don’t understand what’s happening,” he mutters into her hair.

She pulls back to survey him. “Mike Wheeler risked everything to punch the shit out of someone who hurt you. That’s what happening.”

He pulls out of the embrace when he feels the heat in his cheeks, batting her away as she continues to grin victoriously. Max fills the space she leaves, slinging an arm around his shoulder almost painfully and pulling him down to his height.

“I always told you he wasn’t a shithead,” she’s saying, grinning too, side pressed to Will’s. It anchors him amongst the confusion.

“I’m sure it was the other way round,” he returns, even though he still isn’t sure what Mike did. From the sounds of it, he threw a few punches to defend Will’s honour, which is just ridiculous. Saying it out loud would only make it all the more stupid, so he bites his lip and claims a vacant seat a few away from Mike’s.

Mike is talking to Dustin, heads bent and voices murmured. Mike has his knuckles pressed against his collarbone, a phantom image of the earlier fight. It’s the most serious he’s seen the two of them together, and it’s sobering. Dustin moves to say something, but Mike pulls back and out of his seat, choosing instead to pace the corridor instead of looking at his friend. Dustin’s gaze falters, landing momentarily on Will before residing permanently on the floor.

The secretary comes out again to shoo the rest of them away and back to class, except Dustin who gets sent to the nurse’s office with a light scolding over the state of his knuckles. El reaches out to squeeze Will’s hands as she heads back to class with Lucas and Max, mouthing ‘talk to him’, obscenely exaggerated. Will just nods, shouting “I’ll call you,” as she turns the corner.

Mike doesn't sit back down. He's still pacing, wincing slightly every few paces when his knuckles graze against his track uniform.

"I can get you some ice?" Will offers, voice sounding loud in the echoing emptiness of the corridor. Mike doesn't stop pacing, but his step does falter slightly.

He pauses. Silence. Then; "Mr Newby told us to wait here." It's the first time he's spoken to Will directly all afternoon, and his voice sounds a little scratchy in his throat.

"I really don't mind. The nurse's office isn't far," he tries again, but Mike cuts him off.

"I'm fine, Will," he says abrasively, then stops his pacing with a sigh, flopping into the empty seat to the left of him. "Sorry, I'm being a dick."

"You're being no different than usual," Will murmurs drily, which makes Mike scoff, so quietly it doesn't reverberate off the wall. It belongs to the two of them only, in that moment. Will would let it sit, but he's itching for answers, to all the question he does and doesn't know.

"What happened?" he asks carefully, gaze fixed straight ahead, at the small strip of glass that acts as a prison cell window.

Mike doesn't answer, not for a while. He stares straight ahead, scuffing his shoes against the floor, legs folded over one another. "Oh, you know," he says after the silence, tone forcibly casual. "Got in a fight, lost my scholarship, and now I'm sat here with you, Will. Not the worse end to a shitty day."

He looks to Will and smiles, small and self-conscious. Will feels the words like an injection of serotonin in his blood, but he fights hard to not react. He can't let Mike distract him – he has to know what's happening.

"I didn't know you had a scholarship. Guess I always thought you were still waiting like the rest of us."

Mike shrugs, wincing with the effort on his shoulders. Will wonders

how many punches Troy got in, and how many bruises lay under his track kit. "I didn't want to brag. Plus, it's just UCLA. It's not Harvard, like Lucas."

"It's still a big deal," Will persists. "You always wanted to write and go to LA. I'm really happy for you, Mike."

"Don't be," he laughs bitterly, feet halting with a sad squeak. "It's all gone now. I blew it."

Will opens his mouth to say something, but his voice gets stuck around the words. He swallows. Tries again. "Why would you risk it? For Troy? You know what he's like, he always gets his way, of course he was gonna get you kicked off the team—"

"I didn't do it for Troy," Mike murmurs, turning to Will abruptly. He's got an intent sort of look on his face, and up close Will can see the faded freckles covering his face. He wants to brush his fingers against Mike's swollen cheek, and linger on his lips. He doesn't.

Instead, he eloquently says, "huh?"

"I didn't do it because Troy is a dick. I did it for you."

"Because... I'm a dick?"

"Will," he laughs exasperatedly, leaning back in his chair, drawing himself away from Will.

He's still reeling from being so close to Mike, inches from his face, so he scrubs a hand across his face and tries again. "Mike, I'm sorry, I don't- I don't understand—"

"I saw him. I saw Troy with you," he says abruptly, but softly, like a whisper in a confessional booth. It explains nothing, but Mike seems exhausted by the effort of it. Will says nothing, opting instead to wait for Mike to open up, like a scared animal, skittering away from the hand that feeds.

When Mike doesn't say anything for a few minutes, and instead leans forward to bury his face in his hands, Will probes a little. "In the locker room?" He thinks back to the shower, the *fairy*, recoiling at

the memory.

Mike nods. Shakes his head. It's ultimately more confusing than knowing nothing.

"Yeah, I saw him in the locker room. But I- I saw it before..."

Will frowns. He's been off Troy's radar for years, too pathetic to even ridicule beside name-calling or the occasional note. Troy got new victims in high school, and Will got the isolation he so desperately craved. Even at the end of middle school, he wasn't present enough to be on the food chain. The last time Troy pulled a stunt like that was before him and Mike fell out. Back when they were friends and –

Oh, Will thinks, heart plummeting through his stomach onto the whitewashed floor. Mike saw. Mike saw Troy and his friends in middle school, saw them pushing him into dumpsters and pulling at his hair. burning him with lighters they found in their dad's closets. He saw them, maybe even heard them. He knew. Mike knew. He knew.

"Middle school?" Will asks, voice hollow. Mike just nods, averting his gaze, face burning with shame or regret or something.

Mike knew. Mike saw him, saw them, and he said nothing. All this time, Mike knew.

"How many... times?" He winces at the words, but he doesn't know what else to see.

Mike shrugs, with great effort. "I don't know... too much. Too much to be a good friend. I should've – why didn't – Will..."

He doesn't know how to respond. All these years he thought it was him, him who was the coward, letting the words Troy used penetrate and burrow into his soul. For turning around that day and driving Mike's face into the floor in the hopes it would make it all stop. He still is the coward, he knows that. But Mike knew, he saw, and he let it happen and oh god, he's gonna throw up or cry or something...

He didn't realise he'd even gotten out of his chair until he feels Mike grasping at his arms, turning him round. He tries to say something

but he can't, focusing instead on Mike's pained expression, the way his face twists and contorts with great effort.

"I'm so sorry," he forces out through gritted teeth, following Will's eyes when he adverts them. "I was such a coward. I just froze. Thought if I did it would all go away eventually and everything would be fine. And when I saw you, and Troy and everyone in the locker room, I felt it again. just this paralytic fear, which is stupid because you were the one they were hurting, and I let you down again and-"

He breaks off, letting go of Will's arms to draw in a breath. "Troy came up to me, during the meet. He was saying all this stuff about you, like he thought I was gonna back him up, like you aren't better than all of us. And I just thought- it's time I stopped freezing and hiding. Because I've done that before and I lost you and I can't - I just can't do that again."

He stops, pulling further away, steeling down the corridor, pacing pathetically again. Will just watches him. he doesn't know what to say, or how to say it. doesn't know if he's dreaming, or dead, or beaten into unconsciousness by Troy, maybe. He did it for him. Mike didn't for him. He can't lose him. Will can't breathe.

"Mike," he says, and then louder again when the other boy doesn't stop pacing. "Mike."

He falters, turning to face him. "Yeah?"

"I don't blame you," Will says, and it's true. He doesn't blame Mike. He couldn't blame Mike. "For any of it. you were young and scared and so was I. I don't blame you. I couldn't blame you."

Mike shakes his head with a pitiful laugh. "No, Will, c'mon man. I don't deserve that. I was the worst best friend."

"Who cares? It was years ago I've spent too many years blaming myself and I don't want to do it anymore. I think you should stop too."

And Mike does stop. At least for a second. He stops, and smiles from



the other end of the corridor, mouth twisting upwards momentarily before vanishing.

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They stand together for a little while longer, opposite ends of the corridor but infinitely closer than they've been for years. They stand there till their parents arrive.

Mr Wheeler is exactly how Will remembered him. Short, and squat, with glasses that sit uncomfortably on his doughy face. His mouth is drawn into a grimace that only deepens when he sees Mike.

"Tell me you're not suspended," he drawls, fixing Mike with a look which reminds Will of his own father; cold and disapproving.

"I'm not suspended," Mike echoes, almost humorously, which makes Mr Wheeler readjust his glasses with a sigh.

"You better not be," he warns, tone chilling, as he follows Mr Newby through the open door, Mike trailing not far behind. Will's gaze follows him till the door closes with a definitive thud.

It takes ten more minutes before anyone shows up to collect him. It's not Jonathan or Mom, like he's expecting, but instead Hopper, red in the face, panting as he turns the corner.

"Hey, kid," he says warmly but breathlessly, reaching out to scrub Will's hair like he's still a young child. Will smiles thinly. "You good? Heard there was a fight."

"I'm fine."

"Get in any good punches?" he asks, with a certain level of glee, as though expecting Will to be a secret heavyweight champion.

"I wasn't involved," he answers bluntly instead. "Where's mom?" he asks, peering around like she's hiding behind his bulking stature.

“She couldn’t get out of work so she sent me instead,” he explains, hands pressed to hips, uncomfortably staring anywhere which isn’t Will. He does that, sometimes. Like he doesn’t know how to talk to Will. Which is stupid. He’s the most adult person he knows.

“You ready to go?” Hopper asks, when Will can’t tear his eyes away from the door to Mr Newby’s office. He nods, and follows the chief to the parking lot.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Wow, I'm really pumping out one chapter at a moment, and I think we should all appreciate that lmao. I hope you enjoy the conclusion of this cliff hanger and the reveal!! Mike knew all along guys!! Hope that resolves a few questions from earlier chapters.

Hope you all enjoyed!! Your comments and kudos mean the world, and thank you so much for reading!!

## 15. Chapter 15

### Summary for the Chapter:

"Whatever, Will thinks, scrubbing at his eyes with balled up fists, as though that will clean his mind. He can't think about Mike, or what is happening in that office right now. He can't think about the shame in Mike's eyes when he admitted he knew, or the fear in his shaky voice when he lost his scholarship.

He can't think about any of that, because Hopper is frowning at him, eyes skating between him and road."

The air in Hopper's van is stifling. It's his jeep, complete with the Hawkins PD logo, and to Will it feels a lot like he's being arrested. Well, it would, if it weren't for the way the chief has Bruce Springsteen blaring through his steady speakers, or the way he's alternating between tapping on the steering wheel and playing with the cigarette resting between his lips.

The inside of the van is a mess, littered with takeout cartons and paperwork, and Will is scared to move in case he disturbs the ordered disorder. Instead he sits rigidly, legs pressed together, focusing on a thumb-sized picture of El wedged on the dashboard. She's young in the picture, six or seven, but she's smiling in a gleeful way that Will recognises so well. It helps relieve some of the pressure building in the centre of his chest.

It doesn't matter what's happening in Hopper's van though, not really. His mind is still back at school, waiting outside Mr Newby's office, heart dropping through his chest as Mike says *he saw*.

*He saw.*

Why didn't he say? Probably because by then, things had already unravelled. Probably because he thought he could wait it out. That he could fix it with his stupid smile and by holding Will's hand. And he would've been able to, Will thinks bitterly, if he weren't so damn

fucked up.

Who reacts like that? Mike might have seen and done nothing, but still. It's still Will's fault. It's his fault. It is.

Is it?

Is it anyone's fault?

Whatever, Will thinks, scrubbing at his eyes with balled up fists, as though that will clean his mind. He can't think about Mike, or what is happening in that office right now. He can't think about the shame in Mike's eyes when he admitted he knew, or the fear in his shaky voice when he lost his scholarship.

He can't think about any of that, because Hopper is frowning at him, eyes skating between him and road.

"Huh?" Will asks, because he's sure Hopper has said something, but he has no idea what. He's too into his own head to have caught anything, but now he notices that the radio volume has been lowered to a dull buzz and Hopper has something similar to concern shining in his eyes. Will knows the look well; has seen it twice before.

*"Kid, are you okay?" He's wet, so wet, and he's shivering. He's told El everything. He has nothing left in him, and now he's just a shell, empty, cracked open, carved out.*

*He nods. He sniffs. Pathetic, but so tired and he doesn't know how to tell Hopper that he's not okay, he's empty.*

*"I think you should drive him home," El's voice swims in his head, so far away, despite her arm wrapped intrinsically around his.*

*Hopper nods, eyes unreadable, strong hands reaching out and harbouring him. He feels... safe.*

"I was just asking if you're sure you want me to take you home," Hopper asks. His tapping on the wheel has stopped, and Will finds he misses it. He never thought he'd miss something so loud, so outwardly masculine.

“Oh?” Will asks, even though he heard him. He wishes his heart would stop thumping so loud in his ears, but it persists. “Yeah, that’s fine.”

He twists towards the window of the car, kicking a stray MacDonald’s wrapper beneath his foot. It crinkles, dark red sauce smearing the toe of his trainer. He makes no attempt to wipe it off.

Hopper doesn’t reply, but doesn’t turn up the volume on the radio either. They stop at a traffic light, the rumbling of the truck quietening so he can hear the small huffing of the chief’s breath. They’re never alone, never missing El, or mom, or some sort of buffer. Here, alone in Hopper’s truck, Will realises how little the two of them share, how little they talk.

Jonathan would know what to say. Jonathan has always been great at talking to adults. Will isn’t; he isn’t good at talking to anyone.

“I was just thinking-” the chief says, in one rushed breath, like he’s been holding it in and is just now exhaling. “Your mom and Jonathan won’t be home for hours. And I don’t like the idea of leaving you there alone.”

“I’m eighteen,” Will says, mind seven paces behind. He’s used to being alone on school nights, long before it was even legal, and he’s used to looking after himself. He does a pretty shit job, but still. He hasn’t been fired yet.

Oh, Will realises, seeing the way the chief grimaces and half-nods. He doesn’t want to leave Will after the fight. He’s heard the countless horror stories when his mom is wine drunk. He probably knows more about Will’s breakdowns than his own doctor knows. Will wonders how long he was in Hawkins before he heard about the bathroom incident. Or the food. Or the months off school, crying under his bed, waiting for everything to be over. Not long, he guesses. His mom is very emotional after a glass of wine and a soppy movie.

Hopper shifts uncomfortably. It amuses Will, the look of discomfort on his face, the man’s inability to talk, when *El Hopper* is his daughter. “Plus, El would probably like to see you,” Hopper settles on, after a minute of silent agony, ignoring the fact that he’s pretty

much babysitting Will at this point. He wasn't even in the fight. They should be babysitting Mike, if anybody.

Mike. He's probably home by now. How much trouble is he in? Will's memories of Ted Wheeler are hazy at best, and he remembers the absences more than anything. Not as absent as Will's own father, but still.

Maybe he's in his basement. That's where he always used to go to think but maybe he doesn't anymore. Maybe he has a new place, that Will doesn't know about. Maybe the basement is a laundry room, or the place Holly takes her friends, or a gym.

"Will? Kid?" Hopper is saying, and it takes Will a minute to realise the car has stopped moving and the radios cut out completely. They're parked on the chief's drive, and he's staring at Will like he's a broken toy he doesn't know how to deal with. Change the wiring, maybe? New batteries? If only it were that easy.

Will smiles, trying to ease the tension, but it only makes the chief look more uneasy, twisting back in his seat and clearing his throat. Will tugs at the car and pulls himself out, grateful for the fresh air.

The door is already open when Will reaches it, so he lets himself in, Hopper crowding behind him, the proximity making the hairs stand up on his neck. He's comfortable with the chief, he is, but still, he doesn't like feeling like he's a dog, being watched in case he takes a leak on the floor.

He finds El in the living room, curled up on the sofa, legs tucked under her body. Her hair is damp like she's showered, and she's wearing a fluffy pink pair of pyjama's that remind Will of a cloud. She doesn't notice him when he enters, too engrossed in something on TV will doesn't recognise. He really needs to start keeping up with pop culture.

There's someone else, at the other end of the sofa. His legs are splayed, schoolwork spread out the surrounding cushions, but he's watching the TV too, a half brain dead expression on his face. Will isn't expecting to see him, and at first he doesn't recognise him, even though he only saw him an hour ago.

“Oh, that?” Hopper asks from the fridge, where he’s fishing for something. “That’s just the growth on my sofa.”

El and the growth – Dustin, which is still so weird to Will – turn around, attention snapping away from the TV. “Will!”

That’s El, pulling herself up and over the back of the sofa, as Hopper barks “hey, careful!” She just rolls her eyes, pulling Will into a tight hug, most likely with the intention of squeezing all the oxygen out of him. When she pulls back, her eyes are shining with something Will can’t place, but he doesn’t care because he hadn’t realised until that moment how much he needed El to hold him.

“Did you two talk?” she asks, tone low but still carrying clearly through the small scale of the house. Will is numbly aware of Dustin watching them, and though Hopper is seemingly fascinated by the contents of the fridge, Will knows he can hear him. He shrugs in response, avoiding El’s gaze and heading for the gap on the middle of the sofa.

He throws himself down with a force that makes Dustin laugh. “You okay dude?”

Another shrug. El sits down carefully, watching Will this time instead of the TV. Her looking at him doesn’t help his thoughts, which have been moving at 80MPH since she first pulled him out of class.

“Hey, Henderson!” Hopper is shouting, through a mouthful of something, and Dustin sits up, alert.

“Yessir?” His tone makes El laugh. It feels sickeningly domestic. I should’ve just asked to go home, Will thinks.

“Get your ass in here and help me with dinner,” Hopper replies. Dustin rolls his eyes but dutifully gets up and sidles towards the kitchen. Will watches him go, thinking how different he looks to boy sat in the corridor just a few hours earlier.

Confident they’re not listening, he turns towards El, who is still watching him, a carefully considered look in her eyes.

“Is he-” Will tips his head back in the direction of the kitchen and

Dustin. "You know, okay? He seemed pretty shaken up earlier."

"He's fine," El replies, tone dismissive, words almost sharp, like she doesn't want to talk about Dustin, or about today. She rakes a hand through her hair. "He's a lover, not a fighter. He's never hit anyone before..."

"But he did for Mike."

"He would've done it for any of his friends," El says firmly, and Will knows she's right. That's the Dustin he remembers. It's good to see not everything has changed since middle school.

"Is that... why he's here?" Will asks slowly, a small grin spreading across his face.

El swats at him. "Shut up. He's my friend. He can come over any time he wants."

"He seems very comfortable," Will adds teasingly, expecting El to swat at him again, or shove him, or laugh, or something. Instead, her face settles into a pitying, surveying expression which reminds him of his mom, as she folds her arms across her chest.

"What?" Will asks, then again, when she doesn't answer him. "What?"

"Did you and Mike talk?" she says finally. Will turns his gaze away from her and to whatever is playing mindlessly on TV. A laugh track plays.

"Of course we talked," he mumbles, words almost losing themselves in the volume of the TV.

"So he told you about what happened with Troy?" Will asks, an eagerness edging her voice.

"Why are you happy about this?" he asks, suddenly angry. He doesn't know why. He feels angry on Mike's behalf, like he was the one who's future was circling the drain. Maybe because he knows what that feels like. Maybe because the idea of Mike knowing it too makes him feel like he's been shot in the chest.



"I'm... not," El splutters, eyes blown wide with bewilderment. "I just think it's pretty cool, that he'd do that for you."

"I think it's stupid," Will spits bitterly. "No one should fuck over their life for me."

El pauses, lips pursed like she wants to say something. "Maybe he didn't do it for you."

Now it's Will's turn to be bewildered. He twists towards El. "What?"

"Maybe he didn't do it for you," she repeats, shrugging slightly.

"But you said-"

"I know. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he did it for himself. Maybe he was sick of being pushed around by douchebags like Troy. Maybe he was sick of being a shitty friend and finally decided to stick up for you. Maybe he – I don't know – decided that being a decent person was better than running track to impress his shitty father."

El sits back, with a sort of exhaustion, as though the rant has knocked the air out of her. Will doesn't know what to say. He settles on, "he told you about his dad?"

"I met him. That piece of shit doesn't realise how talented his son is."

Will swallows, hard. El is angry too, a justifiable anger like the type Max always exudes, but she feels victorious. To her, they've won. Mike doesn't have to run anymore, and that's good, because he hates it. High school has just become a wonderful place, where bullies lose and friends get to be happy. He wishes it were all true.

"He didn't just get kicked off the team. He lost his scholarship."

"*Shit.*" El looks like she's been burnt, eyes blown wide again, sat upright rigidly. "I didn't realise-"

"I know." Will says, unsure why he sounds so mournful. Sure, it's his fault Mike's future is fucked, he's use to things being his fault. Why does it sting even more now?

They lapse into silence, tinny television laughter mixing with the very real laughter of Dustin and the chief in the kitchen. El smiles at the sound, eyes crinkling, but she looks far away. Almost as far away as Will feels.

“Did you know?” Will asks, gently. Their legs are pressed together with the proximity of the sofa, and her socked feet are pretty much in his lap. “Did you know that Mike knew about middle school?”

El shrugs. “I knew he knew something. He always looked so... sad when the two of you talked. Like something was eating him up inside.”

“Why didn’t I notice?” Will asks, more to himself than to anyone else, tipping his head back until it hits against the sofa cushion.

El smiles softly, like she knows a secret, reaching out to scrub at Will’s hair in the way Jonathan would, before they stopped talking. “You were too busy noticing other things.”

There’s the hiss of scalding water that Will recognises well, and then a loud “son of a bitch!” from Hopper. It is preceded by a small “I’m so sorry.”

El rolls her eyes like this is a regular occurrence and gives Will’s shoulder a final, tight squeeze. “I’m glad you two talked,” she says, with a sincerity that makes Will’s stomach clench, before throwing herself back over the sofa to deal with the commotion.

He should feel anxious, feel his stomach knotted at the idea of facing Troy at school, at the prospect of Mike being stuck in Indiana when the school year closes out, of whether he’s ever gonna get out himself. But he doesn’t. Instead, he feels a soft sort of comfort, as he turns around and watches El pressing an ice pack to the chief’s hand, and Dustin attempts to salvage the pan of pasta.

“Just hold still,” El scolds as Hopper tries to pull away from her. “You’re gonna make it worse.”

For the first time in a long time, Will pulls himself up off the sofa and pads to the kitchen, not content with being passive.

“Bowls?” he asks El, who nods towards a cupboard.

He reaches down to pull them out as the chief moans, “you kids really don’t need to do this.”

“We’re not gonna let dinner burn,” El laughs, reaching out grab a cloth to wrap his hand in. “Now sit down and stop moaning.”

---

After dinner, Hopper drives him home. His hand must still be smarting like hell, but he doesn’t grumble. They drive in silence, but it’s not uncomfortable like before. Will leans back contentedly as they pull into his drive. For a while, he doesn’t want to get out, even with the inviting orange light glowing in the kitchen window and the sight of his mom’s car on the drive. He’s been so comfortable tonight, despite everything, and he doesn’t want to lose that.

Hopper clears his throat when Will finally reaches for the door. “Thank you for being such a good friend to El,” he says, voice cracking with effort it takes him to say.

Will doesn’t know how to respond, door ajar slightly, legs half-swung out. “Uh... she’s the good friend. I just show up.”

Hopper laughs, voice gruff, reaching out to clap Will on the shoulder. “I mean it. You’re a good kid. If you ever need a favour, or a lift, or anything... don’t be afraid to call.”

Will nods, and the chief lets his hand fall, turning back to the steering wheel. “Thank – thank you for the ride,” he says, clambering out and slamming the door shut before anything can get anymore sincere.

He’s set on heading straight for the privacy of his bed when he gets inside, crawling under the sheets and sleeping away the emotional exhaustion of the day. He barely even looks in the kitchen as he passes, shouting a “hey, I’m home” to anyone that’s listening.

Which is why he’s jarred when Jonathan shouts “Will,” the minute he

passes the threshold.

He's nursing a mug of tea, lent against the kitchen counter, face pinched in concern. It's the first time he's spoken to Will directly in weeks and his voice is laced with its usual concern.

He notices his mom next, sat hunched at the kitchen table, hair pulled back and work uniform still on. Her face is pinched too, mirroring Jonathan's. she's clutching someone's hand, squeezing reassuringly, like she used to do when Will would have an episode.

He squints at the third person in the kitchen. They're wrapped in the throw from the Byer's sofa, a neglected mug of tea sat discarded in front. Under the soft, orange light of the kitchen, Will barely recognises them. They're crying too, tears caking their face, blanket soaked.

Yet again, Will's heart drops through his chest.

*Mike.*

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hope you all enjoy this update (and my inability to end a chapter without a cliffhanger!) Also I realised all these updates are taking place chronologically which is weird for me, but still!! Fun times!!

Keep the comments coming!! I love to hear what you guys are thinking/where you think it's going!! It makes everything so much more rewarding!!

PS; El and Dustin are my favs and I'm really enjoying writing them. I may even give them their own one-shot spinoff, who knows?

## 16. Chapter 16

### Summary for the Chapter:

"He looks weird, among all Will's mess, half-finished school work and doodles and, rather shamefully, dirty pots. His room isn't half the safe haven Mike's basement is, and it's much less impressive, but Mike has barely moved an inch and he certainly hasn't actually looked at anything in the room, so Will's safe."

Will feels like time has frozen around him.

There's Mike, sat at his kitchen table, hunched under their old faded grey throw, biting his nails down to stubs. He's crying still, little trails of tears adding to the red-rimmed eyes and stained cheeks which bear his sobs like patchy watermarks. He looks like a watercolour painting Will made in art class once, the edges curling inwards, browns and beiges and the slightest traces of blue.

He's watching Mike, as he stares resolutely at the mug of tea in front of him, as his mom drops his hand to reach out and squeeze his shoulder tightly, nails clutching at the throw, lips pressed into one thin line. He wants to say something, to scream 'what is happening?' till his lungs ache and his throat closes up with the effort. But any and all words freeze in his throat, stuck in his windpipe. Mike doesn't look at him, and neither does his mom, so he turns away from them and questioningly searches for the one person who will still look at him.

Jonathan is watching him inscrutably, finger tips contracting around the mug in his hands. He raises it to his lips in a hesitant sip, eyes never leaving Will's for a second. Will dares his brother to say something, anything, some retort about Mike that Will can disparage with one gesture to the broken boy at the table. He says nothing.

Instead, he sets his mug down, and gently nudges their mom as he passes to the sink, as if to wake her from a slumber. She looks up to Will, still hovering in the doorway, still watching silently, confused,

an outsider in his own house.

“Oh!” she says, standing up as Jonathan takes her mug off the table. He leaves Mike’s, who still hasn’t looked up at Will yet. “Will, honey, why don’t you come sit down?”

She gestures to her own seat emphatically, squeezing Mike’s shoulder again, stronger this time, like she’s harbouring him in place.

Will doesn’t take the seat. He can’t move from where he’s frozen, rigid in the doorway, mind still racing to keep up. Why is Mike here, at his kitchen table? He should be at home, in his perfect home, with his picture perfect family, preparing for his perfect life. He doesn’t belong here. He shouldn’t have come here.

“Will, sweetie?” His mom prompts, but he makes no move for the table. He can see her face contorting, the way she looks to Jonathan to fix this, which really isn’t fucking fair. Will gets it, he does. He used to freeze like this when he was bad. He hasn’t been bad for a while. At least, not the type where words stick in his throat, and his body refuses to cooperate.

Still, he feels that feeling seeping back into his bones when Mike’s eyes flicker up to his for a fraction of second. He looks empty, lights on but no one home. There’s a hot, sticky sort of guilt spreading through Will’s stomach, as Mike looks back down at the tea in the World’s Best Mom mug which sits in front of him.

He doesn’t realise he’s being guided from the room until the light in his eyes is no longer the bright white of interrogation, but more a more muted yellow. It’s Jonathan, hand on his upper arm, sturdy and sure as he guides the two of them into his room. He doesn’t dare step foot in Will’s room, not since their fight, not since they stopped talking. He makes sure he eats, takes his meds, but nothing more.

It’s weird, being in Jonathan’s room again. It looks different in the dark, half-cast by the light from the hallway. It’s messier, clumsy and crowded, Will thinks as he sidesteps a pile of laundry by the door.

Jonathan is watching him again, with that strange, unreadable expression, so Will finally says, “What?”

His brother's cheeks puff as he lets out a breath. Something like relief crosses his face, before it fades back into paternal concern. Will can't remember the last time Jonathan looked at him with anything other than concern, not even since he's been getting better.

"What is Mike doing here?" Will tries again, when Jonathan doesn't answer, just drops Will's arm. They're standing so close, the two of them barely even in the room, almost face to face with how much Will has grown since middle school. Up close, he can see the lines on Jonathan's forehead, and the abstract way it crinkles when he frowns. He's frowning right now. Will is taken aback by how much he is suddenly reminded of their dad, especially with the way his hands skirt to his pockets and his eyes dart, avoiding confrontation.

"Why won't you tell me?" Will tries again. "Why didn't you call me?"

"We did call you," Jonathan says finally. He doesn't sound irritable, or angry, his voice instead holding a tired sort of agitation, like he's been worrying for the past hour. "El said Hopper was driving you home."

Jonathan doesn't say anything, kicking at a stray book on his floor, nudging it slightly across the threadbare carpet. He looks like he's searching for words, struggling to readjust to the talking after weeks of the silence. Will can't stop thinking of Mike, at that kitchen table, sat next to his mom and her searching eyes. He feels itchy, restless, making for the day, hand reaching out to yank it open.

"Will," Jonathan says, so he stops, one foot out the door, mind already racing down the corridor and holding onto Mike until the two of them forget how to breathe.

"Mike..." Jonathan starts lamely. "He's not in a good way right now. You really need to talk to him."

Huh. The thought is laughable. All Will wants to do is talk to Mike, to smooth out the tears and stress lines and snot with his fingers, to ease the tension out of his mind, to untangle the wires of his brain and lay them out straight until they can both see the future clearly.

Will is struck by how much his brother doesn't understand. He

doesn't get it. no one gets it; not even El, who claims to know it all, or his mom who has always known everything.

"That's what I'm trying to do," Will says bluntly. Jonathan shakes his head, surging forward, the two of them slotting into the sliver of light which illuminates the room.

"No, Will, not your own special brand of talking. Real talking. I don't think Mike has properly talked to anyone in a long time."

He says it like its simple. It's something Will knows – has known since the car rides and the lunch times and the parties, really, playing monopoly in Lucas' spare room – but still he feels the tongues of anger at the way Jonathan says it, like it's easy. Mike is a closed book. Has been that way since Will fucked it all up.

No. Since they both fucked it all up.

It's all so confusing now. Part of Will wishes it could just go back to before, when he was the one to blame. When it was all so simple.

"Since when were you the president of the Mike Wheeler protection club?" He snaps at Jonathan, voice a whispered-hiss so Mike can't hear. He doesn't know why he's shouting at Jonathan, whose brow furrows in surprise at the words. Jonathan is just trying to fix everything. Why does Will always have to go and fuck it up? "Last time I checked you didn't give a shit about him."

"Will..." Jonathan starts, but he doesn't get chance to finish his sentiment.

"What, did Nancy change your mind? She's been in town recently, did the two of you finally swap spit?"

It's a low blow, and Will knows it. He's going for the jugular, but he couldn't say why. This is the first time his brother is talking to him in weeks and he's lashing out like a wounded animal, and he just wants to stop, but he can't because there is anger bubbling in the pit of the stomach.

(Just like that day in middle school.)



“What did you want me to say, Will?” Jonathan sounds defeated, pinching at the bridge of his nose like an exhausted father, the same way Hopper had looked when driving him home that night. He has that effect on people. He makes them tired of him. Dad, Mike, Jonathan.

Jonathan is still talking, and Will is listening, because he deserves to be yelled at. His brother doesn't yell, though. He's calm, always so calm. “Yeah, I was wrong about Mike. Kid's not a bully, he's a fucking mess. He needs help, and he needs friends, and I didn't see that but you did. So yeah, you were right. So what? Doesn't change the fact that he needs our help now.”

The anger leaves him, replaced by an aching guilt which sets him on fire. “I'm sorry, Johnny,” Will says with a broken voice and oh god, he hasn't called his brother that since he grazed his knee in 6<sup>th</sup> Grade when he fell off his bike. He wants Jonathan to hold him like that day, arms around his neck, face buried in his shoulder, safe.

Will doesn't reach out. He wishes he could, but he can't. There's a distance between them as Jonathan nods, and takes a step out of the light. He wants to cling to his brother, but he remains separate, instead heading for the door.

“And Will?” Jonathan's voice is impenetrably gentle, holding Will in place. “Give him a hug for me? He started crying when mom gave him one, I don't know when the last time anyone...”

“Yeah, Okay.” Will says, because that's the least he can do for anyone.

---

“You want to talk about this or...?”

Mike is sat in the middle of Will's bed, legs folded up to his chest, almost foetal but not quite. He's still clinging to the dignity of holding himself together, but he's just stopped crying too, and Will

doesn't know which is worse. He doesn't make a move to answer Will's question and instead just sniffs. He looks weird, among all Will's mess, half-finished school work and doodles and, rather shamefully, dirty pots. His room isn't half the safe haven Mike's basement, and it's much less impressive, but Mike has barely moved an inch and he certainly hasn't actually looked at anything in the room, so Will's safe.

Even so, he grabs a couple of dirty shirts off the back of his desk chair and shoves them into his wardrobe as he passes.

"We could put on some music and just... chill, if you want?" Will's own voice makes him cringe. Mike doesn't react, so he reaches for his cassette player and shoves the first tape in. The sound of Tears for Fears trickles into the room, and Will dully realises it's a mix Max has lent him. oh well. No way Mike will be able to realise it's the music of a girl who hates him.

Or, at least used to hate him. She likes him now, Will thinks. The past few hours have been so confusing. He grabs at the nearest stack of books and makes a move to shove them onto his shelf, but as he passes the bed he feels fingers curl suddenly, softly, around his wrist. It's Mike, nails gently grazing Will's skin, holding him firmly in place. Will could break free if he wanted to. Pull away, and run out the room, and out of Hawkins.

He doesn't want.

So instead, he looks down at the fingers gripping his arm, and then at Mike, whose eyes are staring up at him resolutely. They're still rimmed with red, and shadowed with the remnants of lost sleep. It feels like looking starkly into a mirror, and for a moment Will forgets himself.

"Can you sit with me?" Mike's voice sounds small, far too small for him, and there's a desperation behind the words that freezes Will. "Just for a minute?"

Will nods, realising that this is the first time Mike has said anything since he got home, and his voice is chipped at the edges, cracking with the strain of words. He takes a tentative seat on the edge of the

bed. He doesn't want to displace the balance in the room, the quiet sense that Mike *needs* him, that Mike *wants him here*.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come here." He says it in one rush of breath, and at first Will doesn't fully understand what he's said. He's fidgeting uncomfortably, shifting on the bed, until he's at the head of the bed, and Will at the foot. Mike's gaze remains fixated on him, like he's testing the waters for hostility. Does he seriously think Will could hate him? The same boy he's been trying and failing to forget since middle school?

"It's fine." Fine doesn't cover it, but Will shies away from Mike's gaze with a shrug. He reaches out, absent-mindedly playing with the edge of his cover, rolling it between his fingers. Mike is still watching him, carefully, as though one wrong move will make the tears start again, more aggressive than before.

"I couldn't think of anywhere else to go," it's like a confession, dripping off his tongue, and Will looks up. Mike is staring at him with a cool intensity, as though he's trying to communicate something telepathically. 'what?' Will thinks pathetically 'what do you need? And why don't I know it?'

Mike answers his silent pleas, sucking in a sharp breath and blowing it out through his nose. "Do you remember when I cut my hand open on that bottle in the park?"

Will blinks slightly, then nods. It's not what he was expecting Mike to say, but he does remember that day. They were nine, and dicking around with Dustin, when Mike had slipped and cut his hand on a discarded lager bottle. He never cried – unlike Will – but he had cried then, open weeping, scared and vulnerable.

"Yeah, I remember," he says belatedly. "There was blood everywhere." It had coated the ground and made it slick, but Will had knelt in it anyway to get a proper look at Mike's hand. He remembers the acrid smell of blood, metallic in the air, and the jagged line of the open wound down the palm of his hand.

"You carried me here-"

"I think I sort of dragged you," Will protests, but Mike keeps talking anyway.

"Your mom patched me up, and kissed my hand, and she made us hot chocolate." Will remembers that too. Remembers the sesame street plasters and Mike crying on the sofa, and biting his lip so much that it bled too. He doesn't know why Mike remembers it, though. It was a nothing-moment, a blink-and-you'll-miss-it slice of childhood that everyone forgets.

"It was the safest I've ever felt," Mike says suddenly, tone open but blunt. "Guess I just wanted to feel like that again?"

Will thinks of his mom, and of Jonathan, his perfect imperfect little unit of a family. He thinks of Mike's own family, of his distant father and his make-up masked mother and the absence of Nancy, the only one of them who was ever real.

But mainly he thinks about how Mike feels safe *here*, with *him*, but not in his own home.

"Mike, what happened?" He's prying, he knows that, but he does so gently, calmly. He reaches out and sets a hand on Mike's leg, a mirror of the car, wishing he had the nerve to reach up and grab his hand.

But Mike shakes his head and screws up his eyes, curling in on himself more and more till his cheeks press against his knees and his eyes are obscured from sight. Will reaches upwards and gently takes hold of his cheeks, prising his head up, so that their eyes meet. He's knelt in front of him, watching, searching for the answers Mike is shying away from.

"I fucked it all up..." and the sobbing starts again, a gentle avalanche, pouring like it never really stopped. Will feels like he's frantically searching for a faucet to turn the waterworks off, hand skating over Mike's leg, his knee, his shoulder until he eventually lets it drop dejectedly by his side.

"No, you didn't," he protests weakly, Mike balking and tilting his head up towards the ceiling, clearly not buying it. "Mr Newby didn't suspend you, you even- hey-" he says it so softly, like he's taming a

wounded animal, and Mike finally drags his eyes away from the ceiling. “You even made Max like you.”

It’s a pathetic joke, but Mike chuckles anyway, weak and watery. He reaches up to wipe away his tears, as Will rocks back on his heels, wishing he could be the one to do it for him. “I lost my scholarship, Will.”

“You can call UCLA,” he’s rambling now, and he sounds desperate even to himself. Mike sighs and presses the heels of his hands, as though to finally cut off the supply from his tear ducts. “You can explain everything, they’ll understand, they have to-”

“That’s not how this works-” Mike tries to interrupt, but Will pushes on.

“Then we just have to make it how it works.”

Mike looks at him pointedly, sharp lines and cutting eyes. “You really don’t understand, do you?”

It fucking stings, but Will doesn’t let it. He’s got a plan, and Mike will too if he just hears him out. “You just need to call them, and you can tell them it was a misunderstanding, an accident-”

“It was assault, Will,” and that shuts him up. He closes his mouth, words still formed. Mike isn’t looking at him, instead pulling himself to the edge of Will’s bed, so his feet graze the floor. “I’ve lost my place on the team and my scholarship, and I’m screwed. That’s it.” He says it firmly, with a nod, like it’s all decided. He’s not crying anymore, but his face is still stained. A boy who was that heartbroken minutes ago can’t be so sure now, Will thinks.

He knows he should say something, but words seem meaningless now. There’s still an edge to the air, anger lingering, and Will doesn’t want to displace the gentle balance. Instead he stares at the floor, at a plate he left there a few nights ago, looking up at Mike every now and then.

“I thought...” Mike’s voice is quiet, cracking. It’s so gentle that at first Will thinks he’s imagining it, but then Mike is waving him off with a

simple “forget it,” pulling himself off the bed and absent-mindedly kicking a stray shirt on the floor.

Will leans, but doesn't stand. Mike looks like he's about to leave, hovering halfway between the door and the bed, and the thought makes Will's heart ache. “Mike?”

That's all it takes. Mike relents, throwing himself back on the bed with a sigh. He lands closer to Will than they were sat before, legs overlapping, but Will doesn't dare move. Mike leans back until his head grazes the window ledge. When he speaks, his words are carefully considered, meditated. “I really thought I was gonna get out of here. Go and do something with my life, get the fuck out of Hawkins.”

“You still can.” Will insists, shifting slightly so that Mike looks up at him. He's smiling, but it's sad, straining his eyes, and pulling his nose into the sombre portrait. Will insists venomously, because he needs it to be true. He can't see Mike in Hawkins forever; not the Mike from childhood, or the Mike he created in his head, and certainly not this Mike, with his gentle eyes and careless touches. He deserves to be free.

“The world isn't kind to former high school jock burnouts with average GPA's and a sure fire job in their dad's business.” Mike grin vacuously, but doesn't look away, holding Will's gaze in his own.

“It's not too kind to people like me either?” Will risks, returning the empty grin with one of his own.

“And who are those people? People like you?” Mike asks. He's close, too close, burning hot, and Will wants him to know but he can't know. He can't ruin this, can't ruin them, just because there's something fundamentally wrong with him. And there is something wrong with him, Will knows this. He's a misprint. That fact has been clear since childhood.

“If you're not leaving Hawkins, then I'm not either,” Will says instead, firmly, which makes Mike finally sit up fully.

“What are you on about?”

"I mean it," he sounds solemn even to himself, but it makes Mike laugh a little, leaning forward towards him. "I might not even get a place at NYU. Ill just stay here and become... a mechanic, or something?"

Mike laughs again, full-bodied and real. It makes Will laugh too, even if it's at his own expense. "You're gonna become a mechanic?"

The idea is ludicrous and stupid, but Will has never been more certain on anything before. If Mike is staying, so is he, even if it means being stuck in the hellhole of Hawkins forever. "Sure, why not?"

"Okay then, Will Byers," Mike extends his hand like a gauntlet, and Will shakes it. "We'll both stay."

"It's a deal," Will says in return.

And he means it.

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Mike still looks fragile when Will sees him to the door. In the half-cast light of the porch the tear tracks are less visible, but his shoulders are still hunched, raised cautiously. He's fiddling with the handlebar of his beat-up bike, looking solemnly between the bike and Will himself, still hovering in the doorway, watching him carefully. Will didn't know Mike still even owns a bike, or that he even remembered how to ride.

"Tell your mom I said thanks," Mike says for the fourth time in the past two minutes. He's biting his lip again, worrying it until the skin bursts, and Will wonders what happened to the confident idol he used to see in the corridor.

He nods again and repeats, "yeah, I will." Mike looks a little more at ease, as he starts the bike down the gravel drive, away from the house. Will hates watching him go, wishes he could pull him back inside, but it's nearly ten already. They've spent the past few hours

playing Atari in the living room and eating the endless snacks his mom kept bringing them. It felt exactly like childhood, save the way Mike kept sniffing and how Will easily managed to wipe the floor with his ass. That never happened when they were younger.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Mike shouts over his shoulder, and he already sounds lighter in the darkness. How can he shrug off the day that easily? Will would be confused, if it weren’t for the fact that he knows this Mike, and how knows how he copes.

Still, he shouts back “wait” and forces himself down the porch steps and into the darkness. He’s almost breathless by the time he reaches Mike – oh god, he’s so unfit – so he inhales deeply and throws his arms around the other boy’s neck before he can think it through anymore.

Mike stumbles a little under the shift of weight, grip on his bike faltering. Will doesn’t care. He buries his nose against his collarbone and breathes deeply. There’s not much difference in height between the two of them anymore but he’s still strained on his toes to fully embrace him.

After thirty seconds he feels Mike’s hands close around his back, holding him firmly in place. There’s the pressure of his chin resting on his head, his hands firmly on his back, the steady beat of his heart and nothing else.

“You okay?” Mike murmurs, voice so close to his ear, and Will just nods and squeezes tighter, and tighter, until everything else is gone.

He’s okay. He’s never been so okay before. He never wants to let go.

When they finally do pull away – Will isn’t sure whose first to retract – Mike’s face is flushed red, and he’s fucking smirking, and Will wants to pull him back into another embrace to get that stupid look off his face, but he doesn’t.

“Uh... thanks?” he half-laughs, staring intently at Will who can’t look at him, he can’t. Instead, he just awkwardly pats his shoulder and heads for the front door.



"I'll pick you up tomorrow then, I guess," Mike calls, and Will raises his hand in a wave, not looking back.

If he has to look back, he'll never be able to make himself leave.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Sorry for the late update!! Life got absolutely crazy, but you probably already know that!! My exams got cancelled and I had two days notice that I was leaving college for good. I've been spending most this week adjusting to life in quarantine, but the one thing I am thankful for is more time to write!!

Hope you enjoyed this chapter, it's sort of a milestone for our idiot boys. This fic should be completed a lot sooner than I originally anticipated due to lock-down, which is great!! Thanks for the continued love, I really appreciate it x

## 17. Chapter 17

### Summary for the Chapter:

"There's no door to yank open though, and his hand falls limply to the side when he sees no car, replaced by the sleek rust of a bike, and Mike grinning like a maniac once he sees the confused look on Will's face."

Mike is late the next day.

Will doesn't even know he has Mike's arrival time memorised until it comes, and then goes, Will is still sat at the kitchen table, pushing an empty glass back and forth. He must be irritating, because Jonathan yanks the glass away after a few minutes and whisks it away to be washed. Will decides to wait on his front porch.

There's a terrible minute, arms wrapped around his knees, cheek pressed against the fabric of his pants, when he thinks something must've happened to Mike. Ted Wheeler doesn't strike him as a particularly violent man, but Mike had been distraught last night and Will knows better than to presume what people are capable of. He thinks of Mike turning up late with a broken nose or a black eye, and nearly throws up his full plate of eggs.

There's an even worse minute when Will thinks that Mike isn't coming for him because of last night. He thinks about the hug – has been able to think of nothing else since – and all he can remember is how loudly Mike's heart had been hammering in the silence, and the shaky way his fingers had closed around Will's back before tightening. He scared him off. He came on too strong. He messed everything up. That's the last time he follows Jonathan's advice, or obeys the voice in his own voice.

He's so relieved when Mike does finally turn up that he doesn't even notice at first. He pulls himself off the porch, grabs his rucksack and starts for the passenger side of the car. There's no door to yank open though, and his hand falls limply to the side when he sees no car, replaced by the sleek rust of a bike, and Mike grinning like a maniac

once he sees the confused look on Will's face.

"What? Don't you like my sweet ride?" he rocks the bike back and forth underneath his body, making the wheel's squeak. "I seemed to recall it making me very popular back in middle school."

"You were never popular in middle school," Will says, surprising himself at the jab. "What happened to your car?" he circles around the bike, pressing his fingertips to the handlebar like there's a secret button that will transform it to a car, to Mike's car, their safe haven.

Mike just shrugs, still grinning up at Will. "Nothing much. It is sat at home on my drive. Apparently, cars are for winners."

Will expects there to be bitterness in his tone, but he just sounds faintly amused. Will lets his hand drop, and looks up to Mike. He looks fine, no trace of the upset boy who was crying at their kitchen table less than twelve hours ago. He's not wearing his letterman jacket but he looks no different without it. It's replaced instead by a blue bomber jacket, baggy on his arms, material collecting. He looks good.

"I guess that makes bikes for losers," Will says, trying to match the humour in Mike's tone. "I should know; I was still riding my bike up till a few months back."

Mike doesn't laugh at that, like Will hopes he would, and suddenly he feels shy and embarrassed. He crosses his hands across his chest and laces his fingers together, tugging at them tightly, hoping to stop the heat of embarrassment rising in his face.

"I should get it back by the end of the semester," Mike says instead, running a thumb across the cross bar of the bike. Then, distractedly, he says, "He's not good at holding strong on punishments."

"Your dad?"

Mike doesn't answer that either, and Will wonders if he even hears him, if this is a conversation or a soliloquy. "It'll be sooner, if coach lets me back on the team, so..."

"So, end of the semester?" Will murmurs, mainly to himself. Mike

looks up and barks out a short laugh and there it is; the validation he always seeks in Mike's presence, the confirmation that he is funny and interesting and worth having around.

"You still have a bike, right?"

Mike has a way of looking at him like he's more important than anyone else in the world. Will nods.

"We could just take my car. Jonathan got it fixed, and he's been driving it to work, but I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

Mike frowns, deep, lines wrinkling his forehead "I thought you two weren't talking?"

"Things change," Will says, because if he doesn't he'll scream that it was because of Mike, because Mike changed his mind, because he proved his brother wrong. "He sucks at holding a grudge."

"Let Jonathan keep his car," Mike says, dismissive but gentle. He rocks the bike again with enthusiasm. "This'll be fun!"

*Middle school. The last time he rode a bike with Mike. Three metres behind, Dustin at the front, Lucas yelling at them to pick up the speed, to go faster, even though Will already felt like his wheels were spinning fast enough to lift him off the ground.*

"You okay?"

*Mike's face, eyes on his, twisted uncomfortably far on the seat of his bike. Will wants to talk, to scream yes, but he just presses his mouth together and nods. Mike laughs, turns around, cycling fast enough to launch himself into the sun.*

"What about El?"

Mike blinks, confused. Will knows where his bike is, resting against the edge of the house, rusting where it's been sat since the night at Mike's house, the night of the party and the ice, when everything started to heal again. "What about her?"

"What is she doesn't have a bike?"

Mike scoffs. "Everyone has a bike."

---

El does not have a bike.

The ride over had been cold – freezing, almost for spring – but freeing. Mike had cycled next to him, even though his legs are infinitely longer and he could've cycled way out in front, Will trailing behind because his legs are short and his bike is stubborn, often refusing to move. Mike had talked the entire way there, about the comics they used to read and the races they used to have, and the time Lucas had snorted Pepsi up his nose and nearly thrown up. He sounded happy, Will had noted, for someone who just lost his scholarship, his ticket out of here.

"Who doesn't have a bike?" Mike doesn't sound angry, just confused, squinting at El like she's playing some sort of tone deaf joke.

El rolls her eyes. She's wearing a loose fitting dress with a shirt underneath, no tights and sleeves that cut off at her elbows. She's got her arms wrapped around her bodies to protect herself from the chill, and there's no jacket in sight. "Me, clearly. Most adults in Nebraska. Most adults here in Indiana too, probably."

"I guess it's not the first 'moving house' priority," Will says softly, mainly to Mike, who just waves him off.

"It should be."

El rolls her eyes again, this time elaborately, mascara pressing to her eyelids and leaving small, black marks. She doesn't look uncomfortable, just affronted, shifting between her two feet like she's trying to keep warm. Will pushes himself and his bike forward, running his feet against the ground.

"It's okay El," he says softly, smiling at her. She smiles back. Jackpot. "You can ride on the back of mine."

There's a wariness in her eyes as she surveys the rusty bike, complete with squeaking wheels and a chain that comes off, leaving Will's hands greasy when he tries to fix it. "Is that safe?"

"Not at all," Mike says dramatically, at the same time that Will says, "Yes, of course."

It's Will's turn to roll his eyes, turning to Mike and speaking in a low voice. "We used to do it all the time."

Mike just grins back at him, face stuck like he's halfway through a laugh. Will would save the image if he could. He should start bringing a camera to school. He's sure Jonathan wouldn't mind. "Doesn't make it safe."

"I think I'll just walk," El cuts in when Will doesn't respond. She makes a start too, grabbing her bag from the sidewalk and slinging it over her shoulder, taking a few steps down the road.

Will pushes his bike after her, calling out. She doesn't stop. "El, come on."

"You can sit in my basket like ET, if you want," Mike suggests, with a dumb grin splayed across his face.

That gets El to stop. "You don't have a basket, dumbass," she says, turning around with her hands wrapped around her torso. She sounds like Max.

Will pushes his bike until they're close enough that Mike can't hear them. He's circling the road anyway, bike tilting dangerously as his circles get smaller and smaller. "It's safe, I promise," Will vows quietly, solemnly. "Just wrap your arms around my waist and hold on to the handlebar."

El surveys him for a few minutes, like she's reading his mind, then nods, just a fraction. "Okay. If I fall and die, I'm blaming you."

Will feels a grin split across his face. "I'll take that chance."

---

“That was the scariest moment of my life.”

El pulls herself off the back of Will’s bike before it’s barely even stopped. Arguably, it wasn’t that bad of a trip. Cold, yes, and the bike was wobbly in places but Will kept it steady and he even gave El his jacket when she started shivering against his shoulders. Mike was completely unhelpful, laughing every time El shrieked with fear, pushing ahead at a gruelling pace that Will could barely keep up with.

Max is waiting for them, sat on the lip of the sidewalk, blowing into her cupped hands. She barely reacts to the sight of the bikes, just quirks one eyebrow with a smirk. She looks effortlessly cool, pulling herself up off the sidewalk, not flinching as someone shoulders past her.

“Nice wheels, Wheeler,” she says, surveying the bike with faint amusement. She’s only wearing a thin shirt with hangs down to her knees, and Will knows she must be freezing but her body doesn’t show it, except for the faint flush of her cheeks.

“Thanks!” Mike doesn’t hear the sarcasm in Max’s tone, or if he does, he doesn’t rise to it. There’s no hint of bitterness in his tone, and Will finds it hard to believe that only a day ago they couldn’t stand one another. Mike turns to him. “Is there a bike... thingy...?”

“It’s by the front door, I’ll show you,” Will nods in the direction of the bike rack, which Mike hasn’t used since he got his permit, and his fancy car. Mike starts in that direction, bike wheels bumping up and off the ground with the velocity in which he drags it forward.

El peels off Will’s jacket and hands it back to him, before looping her arm through Max’s. “Please say I can ride home with you tonight.” Her tone is pleading, her bottom lip jutted out, which makes Will laugh. She sticks her tongue out at him.

Max grimaces. “I’ve got a shift, sorry. Tomorrow, though,” she says with a sincere nod. El leans against her, pressing her cheek against the taller girl’s shoulder.

“You’ve got a job?” Will asks. He doesn’t remember Max mentioning a job, even in passing.

Max just laughs at him, reaching out to scrub at his hair. Will dodges it, feeling himself scowl. There are crowds of students swelling around them as they get closer to the school’s entrance. “I’ve had one for the past three months, but thanks for noticing.”

“Where-” Will starts, but Mike chooses that time to swing around, walking backwards, still manoeuvring his bike behind his back.

“El, are you saying you don’t want to ride home on the coolest – and safest – transport in all of Indiana?” he asks, grinning. There’s a sharp stab of something in the pit of Will’s stomach as El rolls her eyes melodramatically, and Mike grins back at her dopily. Oh. Jealously. He hasn’t felt that in a while. He has no reason to be jealous, of either of them. El has Dustin, and even if she didn’t, even if she liked Mike, it’s not like Will would be losing out.

“Oh, that’s what we’re calling it now. I prefer death trap.”

“If that’s meant to be an insult it doesn’t work because death trap is an awesome name,” Mike says, like it’s a settled fact. He looks at Will then, like he’s conferring with him, and he feels the jealous stab in his stomach easing. Oh god, he’s screwed.

“How are you going to get home?” Will asks El quietly, knowing if he doesn’t pull his eyes away from Mike he might implode, because the bomber jacket is just something else, and his therapist has him on new medication which seems to make his heart beat ten times faster and louder in his ears.

El shrugs. “I don’t know. I’ll ask Dustin or something.”

That makes Max smile, though she tries to suppress it to the corners of her mouth. “Of course you will.”

El shoves into her side gently, but she’s grinning too, covering her face with her spare hand. “Shut up.”

They’re at the front entrance now, and the bike rack is a little to the right. Mike has already seen it, and made a beeline for it, leaving Will



stranded in a flood of students. His bike feels bulky under his hands.

"I've got Physics," Max says, nodding towards the entrance. "El?"

"Chemistry. I'll walk with you," she nods, and Max starts to pull her determinedly through the crowd, manoeuvring through the sea of students like it's nothing. "See you bike boys later!"

"There's always room for you on the death trap!" Mike calls after her, waving like a maniac. The crowd is dispersing now, but a few freshmen turn towards him, giggling into their hands. Will watches them with mild curiosity, pushing his bike towards the rack. Part of him thought Mike would be shunned in school since his track team dismissal, but now it looks unlikely. Troy has just as many enemies as he does loyal friends, and Will is sure people were secretly pleased to see him decked in the face. Still, he thought Mike would at least lose some of his status, but he seems just as popular judging by the way the freshman looks at him. He wonders whether they think El and Mike are dating. They certainly look like they're flirting most of the time they talk. Will knows they're not though. El has Dustin, and Mike...

Mike is leant down, trying to figure out his bike chain. "God, I hope bike boys doesn't stick," he mutters under his breath, fiddling with the lock which seems to have rusted over. Will reaches down and secures his own with a smooth *click*.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" He asks Mike, before he can regret the attempt at conversation.

Mike looks up in confusion, red in the face from his fight with the bike lock. "Huh?"

Will crouches down next to him, easing the lock from his hands. Mike rocks back on his heels and watches as Will jiggles the lock until it slides into place. "The bike. Is it a boy or a girl?" he sits back on his heels too, watching Mike. They're close here, knees pressed into the dirt, the school entrance clearing so they're almost alone. "You name your car, I just assumed you would've name your bike too. Sorry."

He doesn't have time to feel self-conscious of his stupid question, or

to pull back, because Mike is nodding decisively. "Boy. It's a boy," he says, so softly that Will nearly misses it. He's not smiling, but he is watching Will with a certain intensity, lips pressed together, eyes fixed on his. He's got something smeared just above his lip, dirt, or chocolate, or something, and Will's fingers itch to wipe it off, or to smear it against the base of his cupid's bow. He could put his fingers in Mike's mouth, or his tongue, wash it off that way.

A bell rings, loud and shrill. It makes Will jump, rocking off his heels and landing in the dirt, back pressed to the metal of the bike rack.

"I've got to run," Mike says hastily, unfolding himself and wiping down his pants. He offers a hand out to Will, which he takes. His palms are clammy and sticky. "I've got European History, and it's the other side of the building, I'm sorry—"

"Mike, it's okay."

*It's okay if you don't want to see me.*

*It's okay if I freak you out, I freak myself out. You'd be freaked out too, if you were inside my head, if you saw the things I thought, the things I've thought about doing to myself, or with you, those are worse.*

*You only see a bit of me and it freaks you out.*

*You only feel my heart beat against your chest once. imagine feeling it in your ribcage every day.*

He can't bring himself to say it.

Mike stops. He's already halfway gone, crossing to the front entrance, bag handle scrunched in his fist. He frowns, like he doesn't understand. He doesn't understand. "What's okay?"

"If you don't want to wait for me after school. You won't have track anymore, and I can ride myself home anyway, it makes no sense for you to hang around—"

Mike, to Will's surprise, shakes his head, frown deepening. "No, no. I'll wait for you," he says hurriedly, like if he pauses for a second Will is going to cycle home without him. He clears his throat. "I mean, I

was gonna do some extra study in the library, so I might as well have some company on the cycle home.”

He smiles widely again, but it looks faker than before, stretched out across his face.

“Oh, okay. Sure. Thanks,” Will splutters. What is he thankful for? Mike agreeing to cycle home with him? The confirmation he’s not a freak, at least in Mike’s eyes? The desperation in Mike’s eyes at the suggestion that he doesn’t have to wait around for Will anymore?

Mike’s already starting towards the entrance, tripping over the curb as he paces backwards. “I’ve gotta run Will. I’m sorry. I’ll see you at lunch.”

Will nods, watching him go. “Yeah. Lunch. Sure,” he says, mostly to himself, crouching back down into the dirt. He pretends to fix his bike lock, but really he’s just trying to catch his breath.

Will’s late to first period.

---

Will never thought he’d be the kind of person to have a specific seat at a table in the school cafeteria. The past three years of high school he spent eating lunch (or not eating lunch) outside in the cold, shivering or sweltering in the fluctuating weather. For the vast part of Eight Grade he spent lunch in the toilet block, feet pulled up on the seat, miserably staring at his sandwiches and listening to the bathroom banter of prepubescent boys. Troy never found him in the toilet block, and neither did his old friends, so it was his safe haven in many ways.

Now, though, he doesn’t have to think about crouching in the toilet or bringing an extra jacket to shiver outside in. He has a table, to the centre left of the cafeteria, where he sits with his friends every lunch, and a designated seat, sandwiched between Lucas and Mike.

They’re not popular by any means, but they’re seniors and Lucas has

some pull as the elected student president, so their table is mostly left undisturbed, waiting for them, like it's just theirs. Will wonders how many people before them thought of this particular table belonging to them. Did Jonathan sit here? His mom? The chief?

El is waving manically at him when he gets to the cafeteria, so he shuffles to the table and throws himself in his seat with a exaggerated sigh. El laughs at him, gathering the tattered wrapper of some chocolate bar and heading towards one of the brims at the edge of the cafeteria. Lucas is already there next to him, frowning at an AP French textbooks like the words will translate themselves. He looks up when Will sits down, nodding slightly.

"You alright?" he asks as Will fishes for his lunch in his bag.

Will nods, triumphantly pulling his crushed sandwich and setting it down on the table. It looks unappealing, like all packed lunches, but his stomach is rumbling so he starts to peel off the saran wrap. He's been hungry more the past few weeks than he has the past few years. "Phys Ed is kicking my ass," he tells Lucas, making him snort.

"I know that feeling dude. I'm glad I got it out the way in Junior year. The smell of the locker rooms alone," Lucas shivers at the memory as El slides back into her seat at the opposite side of the table. "It made me ill."

"What made you ill?" she asks curiously. She's got her lunch spread out in front of her like some sort of banquet, but she's only picking at the edge of her sandwich. She's waiting for Dustin. They've started sharing lunches now. It's disgusting.

"The thought of Will in his tiny little gym shorts," Lucas replies, French revision fully abandoned. He reaches for one of El's grapes but she knocks his hand away.

She's grimacing. "Ugh. I don't want to think of that," she says, then her face melts back into a soft smile, like she can't stand to even pretend to be mean to anyone.

Will just shakes his head and picks up his sandwich. "I don't have tiny little gym shorts."

“You did in middle school.”

“I’ve grown up now.”

“So you wear sweatpants like the big boys now?” Lucas grins. Will just shakes his head, ripping his sandwich in half and offering it out to the other boy. He takes it wilfully, turning his head back down to his French textbook. Will sinks his teeth into his half, nearly choking when someone forcefully slams him on the shoulder.

“Careful,” Dustin chides him, circling the table and doing the same thing to Lucas, who shoves him in retaliation. Dustin just grins, slipping into his seat next to El and throwing an arm around her shoulder. She tries to push him off, blushing, but quickly gives up and instead holds out the container of grapes out to him.

Lucas points at the two of them with energy that bewilders Will. Who has that much energy when in school? “That’s not fair!” he exclaims, though El and Dustin aren’t listening, instead talking quietly to one another. “How come you’ll give him one and not me? You’re a bad friend, Hopper!”

“Boyfriend privileges,” Will returns with a suppressed smile. Dustin laughs, loudly, whilst El flips Will off with a grin on her face. They still haven’t said they’re dating, but they’ve stopped denying it either which is all the confirmation Will needs.

In all the excitement Will hadn’t noticed Mike slip into the vacant seat next to him, the seat where Mike always sits, the seat he chose to sit in the first day after he got kicked off the track team.

It wasn’t awkward having Mike around suddenly and constantly, it was just different. There’s something different in the group dynamic when he’s around, something nostalgic. When they were younger, Mike had been their leader, their dungeon master, and to Will he still is. There’s an admiration around Mike, no matter how much Will tries to shake himself from his twelve-year-old brain. In many ways Mike is still the same as he always was. Quiet. Decisive. The centre, harbouring their group, anchoring them – and Will – in.

“Hey,” Mike says softly, just to Will. Lucas is studying again, El and

Dustin engrossed in one another, and for the moment Will has Mike alone. "How was gym?"

Mike used to have track while Will had gym. Now he just sits in study hall whilst Will changes alone in the locker room. Troy doesn't bother him anymore, besides snide comments and deadly glares. It doesn't matter. Troy didn't get what he wanted, not this time, even if Mike did get kicked off the track team. He didn't separate Mike from Will again.

Will just shrugs, and takes a bite of his sandwich. Mike is still watching him carefully. "It was fine," he says after some deliberation. "Exhausting," he says truthfully, expecting Mike to laugh. He just keeps watching him.

"Troy didn't start anything?" Mike asks, like he asks every time Will has gym, in the same tone he asks how Will's day is as they cycle home. They're together most of the day now aside from lessons. They have their rides to and from school still, alone now that El has started getting lifts with Dustin. Sometimes Mike will call at night, just to talk to Will, just to see how he is even though he saw him just hours ago and will see him again in the morning.

"No," Will says, like always. "I think he's moved on now."

"Perhaps he's realised you're not an easy target anymore," Mike's mouth stretches into a wide smile. Will wants to ask what he means even if he understands, just to hear Mike explain again why he punched Troy, but Max throws herself down into her seat loudly and the spell is broken.

"What's up nerds," everyone looks up as Max grins at each of them. She's sat next to Lucas but he hasn't got his arm around her shoulder, and he doesn't even look at her, so Will assumes they're fighting again. They seem to fight every other day, but mostly everyone ignores it, so Will does too.

Dustin actually looks up at Max's entrance, lifting himself out of his seat and eagerly leaning in. "Have you got it?" he asks excitedly, voice barely restrained. He's bouncing in his seat, but Max just rolls her eyes and lazily roots around in her bag. She produces a sleek VHS

case and passes it across the table to him.

“This is like a drug deal,” Lucas notes, barely even looking up.

“Shut up Sinclair,” Max replies, but doesn’t take her eyes off Dustin. “This is the last time, okay? You can’t keep exploiting my staff discount. Graham is gonna notice that I buy something every shift.”

“He’s not exploiting your discount,” Mike points out, leaning over to try and look at the VHS tape. Dustin shoves it into the depths of his backpack. “He’s exploiting you.”

Max flips him off with a sarcastic smile, whilst Dustin nods and garbles “yes Max, thank you so much.”

Will wasn’t the only one who finds Max’s new job at Hawkins Video cool. Dustin had taken to the idea of staff discount like a moth to a flame, and Max had begrudgingly started to buy him recent tapes before they even reached the shelf, at staff discount prices but with a slight bonus for the middle man. She’s an assistant manager already, though whether that’s due to her business sense or the manager, Steve, Will doesn’t know.

“He knew my step-brother,” Max had explained when Will had asked about her promotion. “He hated him. Thought he was an asshole. We both have that in common, I guess.” Will didn’t even know Max had a step-brother, or where he’s gone now, but the edge in her tone told him not to ask.

“Yeah, I remember Steve. He dated Mike’s sister, Nancy, for a while.” Jonathan had been cut up about that. His death metal intake went up dramatically the few months they dated.

“Dated? Past tense, huh?”

“Nancy moved away for college.”

“Sounds like he had a lucky escape. Those Wheeler’s are bad news.” S

he said it with a grin, but still, Will wanted to know what she meant.

Mike is looking at him now, at the cafeteria table, just staring at him

like Will's got something to say, which he certainly hasn't. Mike's been like that a lot since he got kicked off the track team; attentive, and very starey. He told Will shortly after that he'd stopped taking the beta blockers, that he didn't need them anymore. Will had argued with him about that, told him about the negative effects of quitting medication suddenly, but Mike had just stared at him, blank and careful.

He has plenty of time to watch Mike now, to monitor any negative effects, but so far he hasn't seen any. Mike seems happy, happier than he was for the years before, middle school happy almost. There's been no major shift in high school popularity; Mike doesn't get shoved into lockers, he still gets casual nods in the corridors, and he could choose to sit anywhere he wants, with anyone, but he chooses to sit here with Will.

"You okay?" Mike asks him again, for the fourth time that day.

Will nods. He is okay. He might even be more than okay.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hi!! Hope everyone is keeping well. Sorry for the late delay, I have been working on other things/personal passion projects and I forgot about this fic tbh. This is essentially a long filler chapter but I got very carried away with writing dialogue between the party!! I'm very excited to write the next few chapters!! I think our slow burn may be finally getting somewhere!!

(Also, sorry if this very centric on Will's hyperfixation with Mike, i wanted to show how his crush has become a sort of crutch and portray realistic pining in the mind of someone suffering with mental health issues.)



## 18. Chapter 18: Part One

### Summary for the Chapter:

"He's never actually been to the field for any sporting event outside of mandatory physical education, so he's not really sure what he was expecting. A few more people, maybe. A chili-dog stand, or cheerleaders, or massive signs saying "go team!" "

### Notes for the Chapter:

Time skip because writers block. Also I split this chapter into two parts because it was getting too long, so part two will be up soon.

Will expects to have to shoulder through a crowd of people to get to his friends but when he arrives at the bleachers they're relatively empty. There are a few people milling around on the bottom few rows of benches, and a group of girls in a far corner who look thoroughly irritated, but that's it. He catches sight of El a few rows back and waves to her, shuffling between the metal benches and eventually just stepping over them.

He's never actually been to the field for any sporting event outside of mandatory physical education, so he's not really sure what he was expecting. A few more people, maybe. A chili-dog stand, or cheerleaders, or massive signs saying "go team!" That's what the baseball stadium his dad used to take him to looked like. It was noisy too. Will has memories of Jonathan covering his ears, and sitting him on his knee. Loud, and cold. That's what he was expecting.

When he reaches El she throws her arms around his neck and presses a kiss to his cheek. Will thinks to bat her off, but doesn't, instead snaking a free arm around her waist and squeezing it gently.

"How was class?" she asks, resting her chin on his shoulder. Will shrugs, which dislodges her and makes her laugh.

"Boring," he replies honestly. El lets him go and sits back down,

crossing her legs onto the seats. Her knees are bare, and press against the metal. "Aren't you cold?"

El frowns at him, her forehead wrinkling. "No. It's summer."

"It's freezing," Will takes the seat next to her, batting her off finally when she reaches out to shove him. He glances at Lucas who is sat the other side of him, leg stretched out in front of him, book on his lap. He doesn't look up from it when Will sits down, just mumbles a greeting that is too quiet to catch. Will looks away and back to El, who is gnawing the skin of the side of her thumb with her teeth.

"What happened to Max and Dustin?"

She pulls her thumb away from her mouth. "Max had to work," she explains. "And Dustin was busy with something. He wouldn't tell me what. Said it was a surprise."

The group of girls in the corner burst into screaming laughter that makes Will jump. One of them is jumping up and down with excitement. Will can feel his toes going numb with the cold.

"They said they'd be here," Will says, trying not to sound sulky. He pulls his knees up onto the seat too, pressing his chin against them. An older couple arrive, and sit in the front row. They look young, about Jonathan's age, too young to have a teenage child and to be at a high school event. Probably siblings, or cousins.

El sets a hand on his arm and rubs it sympathetically. "If it helps, Max says she feels like shit about it. She tried to swap the shift but they were understaffed."

"And Dustin?" Will knows he's being childish but he can't help the bitter way he spits out the words. He can feel the pressure of anxiety pushing in his chest – has felt it all week – and now it's bubbling to the surface. He's not mad at his friends, not mad that they have lives outside of their own little bubble, but he can't tell that to the sick feeling in his stomach.

"It's just a track meet," Lucas says, eyes still fixed on his book. Will turns his glare to him but Lucas remains unbothered, casually flicking

a page over.

“It’s his first track meet back on the team,” he challenges. Lucas keeps his gaze fixed on the page for a few more seconds, then slowly turns his eyes up. Will can already feel his anger melting away. It’s impossible to be mad in the face of Lucas’s reasoning.

“Will, it’s just a track meet. It’s a boring, cold experience, and Mike will be fine without Max and Dustin being here.”

“I just want him to know we support him,” a whine threatens in Will’s throat but he holds it down. He can feel El watching him with her big, sympathetic eyes as she rubs calming circles against his shoulder. Lucas sighs and closes his book finally, slipping it back into his backpack.

“He knows,” Lucas reassures.

“I think Max would just scare him, anyway,” El laughs.

Will feels his anxiety melt back into his stomach. It’s a low, grumbling sort of anxiety that he hasn’t been able to shake since he first found out Mike was back on the team. It was a weird situation – none of them really know how Mike was able to do it, but he was back on. Coach had approached him one day in the cafeteria and told him Troy had retracted his statement. Mike had been so excited, but all Will had felt was this sick apprehension resting in the pit of his stomach. It’s a different feeling to his usual anxiety. It’s a fear that things will change, shift back to how they were before Mike got kicked off, or before El, or even before senior year began.

It’s a fear that Will will lose all he’s gained; a fear that he’ll lose Mike, the boy he only just got back. He’s sick of change. He wants things to stay the same.

Will nods in agreement, and El lets her hand fall. “Yeah. He is pretty terrified of Max.”

Lucas leans across Will to say something to El about student government. Will lets their conversation drift on without him, content to lean back and watch as the teams emerge from the locker

rooms. Troy leads the pack, wedged between two boys considerably stockier than him. His face is contorted into a sour pout, arms folded tightly across his chest. Will stares down at him, wondering what Troy would say if he asked him why he'd retracted his statement. For a moment he entertains the idea of running down the bleachers and tackling him, holding him against the ground and asking him why, why, why! He'd probably just smile, and say nothing. Will doesn't think he'll ever know.

Mike leads up the back of the group. He's not talking to anyone, but is instead marching with his chin up, determined and focused. He doesn't even look to the bleachers, to Will, even though he told him he'd be there. Mike had asked him to come, of course he was going to be there.

He pauses for a minute, bends down to hike up his socks, then keeps walking. He doesn't even try to catch up with the rest of the group.

When Mike found out he was back on the team he hadn't stopped talking about it all day. He'd picked Will up the next day in his car, returned for his troubles, and from the minute Will got in he'd been talking about track. About how much he hated the kit, and the rest of the team, but also about how much he loved running, and the way his mom had put the team picture on the mantle. He'd talked about UCLA too. How he was excited for the beach, and the endless sun, and the food. His course, too, learning from the best people, and finally getting out of Indiana.

Wil had nodded the whole time and swallowed down his words. All he could feel was his rejection letter from NYU burning in his back pocket.

Mike is stretching now, right leg bent and left knee pressed against the asphalt of the track. Someone lags back and waits with him. The boy is ginger, and half a foot taller than Mike, Will notices when he stands back up. He shoves the ginger boy playfully. Even from up in the bleachers Will can see the way Mike's face crinkles into a laugh. There's a sharp stab of jealousy in his chest which catches him off guard.

"How long now?" He asks Lucas, suddenly feeling antsy and

uncomfortable. He doesn't like the sick feeling of jealousy, or the fact that he can't stop staring at Mike and he won't even look back. He feels paranoid and cold.

"The other team usually competes first," Lucas says with a slight frown. "And it might be a while before it's Mike's turn. He's not exactly top of the team."

Will clamps his fidgeting hands between his knees. Mike turns away from the ginger boy and squints up to the bleachers, hand cupped over his eyes to block out the sun. He pauses, then lifts his hand and waves. Will waves back, unable to hold back the smile pushing its way onto his face.

"I'm excited. This is my first track meet," El says. Will blinks away from Mike and looks towards her. She looks genuinely excited, smiling back at him. Will wishes he had her enthusiasm, her love of life and new things and the easy way she makes friends. He knows if he were built like El, life would be so much easier. Loving Mike would be so much easier.

"That excitement will wear off pretty quick. There's a reason these things aren't ticketed," Lucas returns drily, but El is undeterred, still grinning, resting her face in her hands and her elbows on her knees.

When Will looks back down to the track field Mike isn't looking at him anymore.

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El is practically asleep against Will's shoulder by the time it's Mike turn to run. He really is the last team member to compete, and by that time they've seen it all – a boy from Will's American Lit class decked it and scrapped his chin against the ground, there was a stand-off between two members of opposing teams and the girls at the back of the bleachers had started lewd cheers to cry and throw off the competitors. By the time Mike's batch is stretching and lining up it's started to drizzle lightly. Still, Will doesn't mind. He just wants

to see Mike run. He just wants to see Mike happy.

“El,” he says softly. She cracks an eye open and squints up at him. “Mike’s about to run.”

“Ugh, leave me alone,” she groans. Next to Will, Lucas sniggers. “I’m sleeping.”

Down on the field Mike is lining up in the first row. He stretches a leg out in front of himself and touches his fingertips against the ground, as though checking how steady it is beneath him.

“Are you tired or bored?” Will asks El. There’s a strand of hair hanging in front of her face, covering one eye. When she huffs out a breath it floats up, then lands back on the bridge of her nose.

“I’m dead,” she says decisively, voice edged with the beginnings of sleep.

“Lucas, did you hear that?”

“I’ll call an ambulance,” Lucas says in mock-sincerity, nodding solemnly. “Or a hearse.”

El lifts her head as Mike turns to talk to the boy racing next to him. He’s not laughing anymore, face drawn into a tight frown, eyes downturned. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, bouncing back and forth with nervous energy.

“El,” Lucas splutters when he notices the way her hair has frizzed up at the back, wispy tendrils curling at the ends and sticking up like statics. El glares at him and Lucas stops laughing.

“Shut up,” she says, pouting as she folds her arms across her chest.

Lucas holds up his hands defensively. “I didn’t say anything!”

“I could hear what you were thinking,” El bites back, and Will thinks if anyone could, it would be her.

There is a silence on the track when the race begins. A form of silence on the bleachers, too, though the group of girls don’t stop

their giggling. The few other parents and students that have drifted in since the meet began fall into respective silence as the timer clicks into place and the sound of shoes on asphalt starts, squeaking and groaning under the pace of the runners.

They take off, a blurred line of gym equipment and sneakers, backs braced chins titled, arms moving like mechanical oars in rhythm with each other. Five paces in and a V-shape is formed, the middle tracks pushing ahead of those at the sides, moving with a vigour. Ten paces in and the formation switches. Fifteen, twenty, shape pulsating, people overtaking and others falling back.

It's thirty paces in that Will realises that Mike has fallen behind. He's beet red in the face, breathes chugging in and out of his mouth. He doesn't have mechanical arms like the other runners, his are clunky and arrhythmic, knees juttering beneath his body. He fumbles, then stumbles, over seemingly nothing. He may as well be a mile out from the others for the expanse of the distance between them.

"Oh my god," Will says, before he can stop himself. He clamps a hand over his mouth, but a laugh wheezes its way out nonetheless.

"What?" Lucas turns to look at him, lips downturned slightly.

Will thinks about lying, but another laugh forces its way out and he drops his hand. He stares in childish awe at the track as Mike trips again on thin air and stumbles onward. "He sucks! He actually sucks! El, are you seeing this?"

El is seeing it, eyes fixed on the track and mouth agape. When Will laughs she does too, mouth forming a large oh. "Yeah. He's terrible!"

"You guys have never seen him run before?" Lucas asks, trying to stay solemn despite the way his face contorts into the type of grin that stifles a laugh. Mike is pressing onwards on the track, despite the way he hacks out a cough, nearly falling face first like the previous runner.

"Not since middle school. I thought he'd got better..."

"He sucks!" El practically screams.

"Yeah, he does," Will agrees, pushing his lips together to stop his laughter. The couple in front have turned around to glare at them, brows knitted tightly together.

"Woo! Go Mike! You can do it!" El screeches suddenly, voice so loud that is actually startles Mike. He pauses on the track, frowning up at them in confusion. Everyone else is looking at them too, but El doesn't care. She gestures for Mike to keep running, which he does, then nudges Will in the side.

"Mike Wheeler for the win!" he blurts out. Mike doesn't stop running this time but he does wave his hand in a wave. Will feels a blush rise up his neck. Out of the corner of his eye he can see Troy leaning sulkily against the brick wall at the edge of the track, but finds he doesn't care.

"You guys are awful," Lucas hisses at them, but there's no heat behind it.

"How did he even get on the team?" El asks, eyes still glued on the game.

"Ted made a wealthy donation to the new science block when we were freshmen," Lucas explains. Will remembers that. Mainly he remembers one semester they couldn't afford Bunsen burners and the next they had a whole new building. He never knew that was Ted Wheelers doing.

"No amount of bribery should account for that," El says, then claps again. "Woo! You can do it Mike!"

Will draws his eyes away from the game and to Lucas. "Do you think he knows he's terrible?"

"I don't think so," El says decisively.

"Should we tell him?" Lucas asks, but El shakes her head.

"No, better not ruin his confidence."

Will doesn't say anything. There is something reassuring in the fact that Mike can't run; he is assuaged by the knowledge that nothing



has really changed since middle school. He spent most of high school believing Mike had become some sort of God, but watching his red, breathless face chug through the last 20 yards of the race, Will knows he is the same Mike who used to hold his hand tightly and push him on the swings.

The same Mike who was – is – *his best friend*.

He crosses the finish line last, panting and stooping down to support his own knees. El is the first out her seat, cheering and clapping, practically bouncing up and down. She drags Will up with her and Lucas follows, the three of them screaming louder for the worst boy on the team than they did for the best.

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They wait on the bleachers for Mike to come back from the locker rooms. Any previous sleepiness has left El's system and she has spent the past ten minutes walking the bench like it's a tightrope, arms out for balance, tiptoeing along the surface. Lucas keeps rapping his fingers against the cold metal, occasionally laughing at El when she misteps. She keeps glaring at him, but he doesn't care, and there isn't any heat behind her eyes anyway.

Most of the minimal crowd have cleared out of the bleachers by now, including the group of girls and the young couple in front of them. The rival team got back onto their bus as soon as the meet was finished – Will couldn't tell anyone what the outcome of it was if he were asked, nor could he tell them what a track meet actually consisted of besides waiting and running and shouting from the coach.

There are still a few parents milling around waiting to ferry their kids home when Mike emerges from the locker room. His hair is wet and frizzy, like he's scrubbed it dry with a towel, and the rucksack on his back bulges with the bulk of his gym kit. He waves when he sees them on the bleachers, a little hesistantly, as though he didn't expect them to wait for him.

“Mike!” El jumps off the bench and clambers over the rows in front until she’s at the barrier, still two feet above the ground. She reaches out and wraps her arms around Mike’s shoulders, leaning through the distant. “You were great!”

Mike smiles back at the praise, a faint blush in his cheeks despite the fact that El is smirking a little behind the blatant lie. “Ha, thanks,” he says softly. “I was definitely a little rusty.”

“We didn’t even notice,” Lucas is clambering over the rows too, but unlike El he avoids the barrier and descends the few steps to the exit. He slugs an arm around Mike’s shoulder and drags his head in. Mike bats him off with both hands, shaking his head at both of them.

“You mean you didn’t see me trip?”

“That’s what that was?” El feigns innocence well, but her smirk gives her away. “We thought it was a new running technique, didn’t we Will?”

She rounds on him, brows raised, and the others look too, all looking to him for judgment. He feels awkward still sat on the bleachers with his knees pushed together, so he forces himself to stand up and close the distance, wandering next to El. He shrugs, non committally, trying to glare at El, but she’s not looking back at him.

“Did you?” Mike asks him, just him. His voice is gentle, a whisper that carries. Will crosses his arms across his chest. He thinks to shrug again, but his shoulders don’t move, not with Mike staring at him. His mouth is sloped into a tight smile, and his voice smiles too. “What did you think Will?”

“I thought it was nice to see you run,” he says decisively, before he can think better of it. Mike’s smile widens and Will stares down at him. The two-foot distance seems like an expanse, Will thinks, stood here with Mike staring up at him.

He blinks away suddenly, looking instead at Lucas. “I’m too wired to go home. Should we go grab food somewhere?”

Lucas shrugs, indifferent, but El pipes up excitedly. “Ooh, food! We

could go to Benny's; my dad loves it there. I am invited, right?" She fixes him with a look, stiff and stern. Will doesn't know what it means, or why she's aiming it at Mike with no premeditation, but he doesn't say anything.

"Of course you're invited," Mike says with a small huff of a laugh. If he notices El's look, he doesn't say anything.

"And Will?" She challenges. Her lips press together tightly and it makes Will frown because he doesn't understand the question, or hostility.

Neither does Mike, apparently, because his lazy smile changes to a sharp frown which pulls at his tired features. From up close Will can see the glisten of water on his forehead and the formation of a tight curl at the centre of his crown. "Of course Will's invited," he says, like it's obvious. Will guesses it is, now. They're as inseparable as they used to be in middle school.

Mike looks at him, expression unreadable. "Will's always invited," he says, like it's the truth. Maybe it is. He blinks away, back to Lucas. "Should I drive?"

"I brought my car too," Lucas says. "Maybe you should take El and Will and I'll meet you there."

"I'm not getting in Mike's car, it's a trash-heap," El says solemnly. It's a lie. Mike's car is always neat and tidy. He treats it with more love than he has towards his own parents. "I'll ride with you Lucas. Will can ride with Mike."

Will feels her nudge him in the ribs but he ignores her, too busy focusing on the way Mike's sloping smile is being directed towards him.

"Sure," Lucas shrugs. "I don't care. Whatever."

El nudges him again, sharper this time, and Will nods. "Yeah. I'll ride with you, Mike."

The smile widens again. "Cool. We can have a catch up. Feels like it's been ages."

It's only been since the morning, but Will nods again numbly.

He thinks about the rejection letter burning a hole through his backpack.

Maybe...

"Okay."

"Okay. Cool. We'll see you guys there, right?"

## 19. Chapter 18: Part Two

### Summary for the Chapter:

"The place still smells of fat, and the floor is still sticky beneath his foot, but no one is arguing. Mike turns and smiles when they walk in, and suddenly the whole place feels warmer, the putrid yellow lights cosy and the sizzling burgers inviting."

Benny's diner is exactly how Will remembered it.

He hasn't been here since he was a kid, when his dad had brought him and Jonathan on one of his rare weekend visits. The floor had been sticky, and the whole place had stunk of congealed fat and Jonathan had argued with dad the entire meal. Will had got a plastic sports car out of the entire ordeal, though what he really wanted was the colouring pad next to the counter.

The place still smells of fat, and the floor is still sticky beneath his foot, but no one is arguing. Mike turns and smiles when they walk in, and suddenly the whole place feels warmer, the putrid yellow lights cosy and the sizzling burgers inviting.

El waves to the two of them from a booth in the corner of the diner. Will wonders how they got here so fast. Probably because Mike missed their turning three times, still buzzed after the meet. He had been practically vibrating the whole ride over, fizzing with the adrenaline. He had seemed so happy, so content talking about their future – their future, he had said it just like that, like they had a shared future - that for a minute Will had forgotten all about the rejection letter from NYU.

It burns a hole in his pocket now as he shuffles into the booth next to Lucas, Mike across from him, smiling at him. 'I should tell him,' Will thinks for a second, 'I should tell them all that I'm not going to NYU and that I'm staying here.' The thought is too big though, too disastrous for the moment, so he pushes it aside. He doesn't want to

see the look on their faces when they realise that his life is truly ruined. He doesn't want to hear what they will say, that he should've tried harder, that he should be better. No; he wants to enjoy the moment.

"I'm starving," Mike says, grabbing for a plastic menu.

"Me too," Will agrees, meaning it for the first time in ages. He is hungry, and everything on the menu looks so appealing. Mentally he counts the money he has in the front pocket of his school bag, meant for emergencies but handy for occasions such as these. \$2.53. Enough for a burger and a milkshake.

El is already sipping a milkshake. She raises her brows at Will as she sips, but he just frowns, hoping to convey 'what are you on about?' El just smirks into her glass.

"How did it feel to run again?" Lucas asks when their food arrives. Will stares down at his burger, unsure where to start. He can't remember when he last ate something this meaty. El leans across the table and poaches a few of his fries as he starts to deconstruct the burger, pulling out the lettuce leaves and portioning it.

"Amazing," Mike says with his mouth full of burger. Will grimaces. If he weren't so enamoured, he would find Mike repulsive. "I mean, the actual running bit isn't too fun, but when it's over – the adrenaline rush."

Mike reaches for his milkshake, grinning like the adrenaline is still coursing through his veins, leaning back into the cushions of the booth. He catches Will staring and his smile softens. Will looks down at his burger.

"Are you sure that's not just relief?" Will asks softly, unsure of whether the jab will be understood as friendly.

Mike just grins and shoves more fries in his face, chewing them into a mush before speaking. "Whatever it is," he says, then swallows hard. "It's brilliant."

Will reaches for another fry but finds someone else's hand already

there. He blinks up, confused and just in time to see Max swat Mike over the head with the back of her hand.

“Hey dickwads!” she says cheerily. Mike gives her a shove that borders on the line of friendly when she tries to pilfer some fries of his plate.

“Fuck off Max,” he grumbles under his voice but she just grins, then steps up onto the booth next to Will and steps over him in one swift move, falling into the limited space there is between him and Lucas.

“Max!” El chides, but she’s giggling into her milkshake despite her attempt to look stern. “We’re in public!”

Max grins back at her, then turns sideways to steal Will’s chips. Mike leans across the table and knocks her hand away before she can get any, and Will mouths a ‘thank you’ at him. He just shrugs, then turns back to glaring at Max.

“Who invited you?” Mike says grumpily, and El leans across the seat to elbow him in the ribs, shooting daggers at him. He sinks sulkily into his seat, which makes Will laugh. Mike looks at him accusingly and Will disguises it with a cough.

Max shrugs, resting both elbows on the table. “No one. I saw your cars parked here on my way home from work.” She cranes her head around the booth, eyes scouring the floor quickly. “Is there a waitress anywhere? I’m starving.”

Lucas proffers his cheesy fries out to her and she gratefully accepts, tearing off a hunk of barely melted cheese. Will is just glad to see the two of them getting along – their last break up had meant none stop arguments that made him want to rip his hair out.

“Hey guys!” Dustin says suddenly from where he stands at the end of the table. He’s got a rucksack slung over his shoulder and is carrying several brown paper bags which he unceremoniously shoves on the table, sloshing Will’s milkshake over the side of the glass. Will goes to grab napkins to clean it up at the same time Mike does, their fingertips brushing against the dispenser. Mike smiles at him – again – and Will can feel his face going beet red.

"Is this some kind of reunion?" Lucas laughs as Dustin nudges Mike.

"What?" He says irritably, stopping his mopping to glare at Dustin.

"Can you move? What's a guy got to do to get a seat?"

"Arrive on time."

Dustin ignores this and starts his task of clambering over Mike to get a seat. He's a lot less elegant than Max, nearly slipping on the vinyl seats and cracking his head open on the table on three separate occasions.

"Don't move for him, Mike," Lucas says sulkily as he's climbing over. Mike doesn't answer, too busy rolling his eyes at the whole affair and catching Will's eye across the table. "In fact, we shouldn't even talk to him."

"Come on Lucas, it was just a joke," Dustin says, flopping into the empty space, red in the face and panting.

"What did he do?" Will asks, if only for an excuse to look away from Mike. He knows he should be lapping up the attention from Mike but all he feels when he looks at him is this guilt – guilt that he can't live up to the version of himself Mike knew in middle school, guilt that he can't even tell Mike about the rejection letter in his pocket.

"He actually went to the principle about impeaching me!" Lucas explains. Max snorts at the revelation and for a second Lucas looks like he's about to yank his fries away from her.

"Dustin!" El scolds, shaking her head at him like he's a toddler. Dustin just shrugs, grin playing at his lips.

"It was just a joke," he says, then leans forward conspiratorially. "I've moved on to bigger and better things now."

He's probably expecting someone to ask what, but no one does. Mike dumps the wet napkins on his empty plate and Will pushes his away from him too. He feels fuller than he has in months, and more content than he has in years, despite the gnawing guilt that is easy enough to ignore. The diner is quieter now, winding down for the



night, and Will feels like they're truly the only ones in the world right now, beside the waitress counting salt sachets and the few other booths full of late night guests.

"As long as it doesn't involve me, that's fine," Lucas snaps belatedly, then shoots a look at Max who snorts into the bowl of fries.

There's a shifting of movement as Dustin slowly extracts his arm from next to him and slings it around El's shoulder, prefaced by an extremely fake yawn. The table erupts into a series of groans that have Dustin smiling proudly and El sinking embarrassingly further into her seat.

"Can you two get a room?" Max says with a roll of her eyes.

"I think it's cute," Will says quietly. El catches his eye and smiles gratefully, and he feels a sudden swell in his heart, surrounded by his friends, all of them happy and laughing.

"Of course you would," Mike says under her breath.

Will frowns, turning to face Max. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She just shrugs in response, faux furious expression dissolving into a teasing smile. "That you're sappy."

Will wants to rebuke – not sure how he'll decline the claim when he could write pages upon pages about the way Mike is smiling at him right now – but is interrupted by Dustin leaning across the table, sending rouge knives and forks scattering.

"Get your hands off my fries, dude," Lucas tries to knock his hand away but Dustin persists.

"Come on, just a few."

"No! Buy your own food."

"Max is eating them! I thought they were fair game!"

"Mike! Hey!"

The whole table goes silent, Dustin and Lucas still squabbling over the fries, but quietly, thankfully. Will looks at the two new figures stood at the edge of the table. The girl who had called Mike's name is short and rounded, with a soft face and blonde hair separated into two bunches that protrude from the back of her neck. The boy Will recognises vaguely – scruffy red hair and denim jacket, an awkwardly tall height for his scrawny limbs – but he can't place it.

"Annie, hey!" Mike clambers out of his seat and envelopes the girl into a hug. She's so short that her face only reaches his torso and Mike's arms wrap awkwardly around the base of her neck. "I didn't know you were here! Everyone, this is Annie. She chairs the film club."

He turns around to introduce her to the rest of the table but the loud squabbling has already resumed, with Lucas kicking Dustin under the table and El desperately pleading for a truce. Max waves half-heartedly to Annie, but looks overall unbothered by either event. Will doesn't say anything, instead staring at his empty glass and trying not to feel jealous seeing Mike with a girl. He's seen Mike with plenty of girls before. He's fine.

"Hi," Annie squeaks to no one in particular, waving a little too, looking like a child in a buggy who's just learnt how to say hello. "We were just discussing what the next viewing should be. We haven't seen you at one in a while."

"Yeah," Mike shrugs apologetically, raising his voice in an attempt to be heard over the din of Dustin holding the conquered plate of fries above his head and trying to shimmy out of his seat. "I've just been a little busy, track and school and all that."

"Completely understandable! We do miss you though. No one works a projector like you," she says, sweet voicing grating. If this is her attempt at flirting, Will thinks, it's pitiful.

"Ha," Mike barks out an uncomfortable laugh, itching the back of his neck self-consciously. "Well... Years of AV club."

AV club – Will remembers sitting in that tiny cramped room, mostly the four of them, but sometimes just the two of them, him and Mike,

at that desk with its one flickering light, the halls quietening as the school clears out for the day –

“Will, right?”

A voice shakes him out of the memory. Will blinks up to see the lanky boy smiling down at him, hand extended for Will to shake. He takes it, and shakes awkwardly, unsure how this boy he can't place knows his name.

“Uh, yeah? I-” He stutters.

“We're in the same art class,” the boy explains as he draws his hand away. “It's Rick.”

That's where he knows him from. He can vaguely recall the boy sitting in the centre left of the class, just to the side of the projector. He's almost too tall for the chair, and spends most of the lesson taking notes while all Will does is sketch. He might have asked to borrow some notes from Rick, at some point. He doesn't really remember.

“Rick, yeah, of course. Sorry, I don't really pay attention in that class.”

He wonders how long Rick has been in his art class – since the year of the breakdown? Since the year he stopped attending class at all? Or maybe since the year of no sleep and different drugs and that weird daze that would last for days and leave him with no memories of what he'd done in that time frame?

Rick doesn't give any sign of this though. Instead he nods, then says thoughtfully. “You don't have to. From what I can see. You're really talented.”

He says it like it's a confession. Will wonders how Rick has even seen his work, the work he usually keeps so private. He must be exaggerating, Will thinks. His art wasn't even good enough to get him into NYU.

He can't say any of this though, so instead he mutters “Uh... thank you.”

Rick looks like he's about to say something else, lips parted in apprehension of the words, but Annie is already hooking her arm through his determinedly, pulling him back up to full height.

"It was nice to see you Mike!" she chirps. "Think about coming to the next meeting?"

Mike slips back into his seat. "I will if I have time, Annie," he says, but the lie sounds unconvincing to everyone listening. "Good to see you too."

With that the two of them march off, Annie pulling Rick along behind her as though he isn't a solid two feet taller than her. Mike settles back down into his seat, absentmindedly swirling his straw around his glass.

"Ooooooh, good to see you Annie," Max teases, smirking as she leans forward on both her arms across the table, through the constant bickering of Dustin and Lucas.

"Fuck off Max," bites back, dropping his straw and narrowing his eyes at her.

"She seemed nice, Mike," El chimes in, leaning around Dustin's back. She's smiling too, a kinder smile than Max's, but still teasing.

"Can you all just leave it?" Mike snaps at both of them. "I'm not interested in her. She's like, four feet tall, we'd look stupid together. Plus she's bossy. And annoying. And anyway, she's clearly dating Dick, or whatever his name is."

"It's Rick," Will supplies, like he knew his name all along.

Mike gestures at him emphatically, as though Will's piece of information proves his point. "The two of them are clearly an item."

"Oh no, Rick's gay," Max says simply, shrugging as she leans back into her seat. Dustin and Lucas finally stop bickering, both of them turning to look at Max with confusion.

"What?"

“Huh?”

“He’s gay,” she repeats, slower this time as though they’re stupid. “Homosexual. I thought everyone knew.”

She says it like it’s simple. She says it like it’s no big deal. The idea that it isn’t flaws Will. He’s aware his mouth is hanging open, but he can’t bring himself to close it. Rick is gay? Someone else in this shitty little town is – like him? The shame and guilt that has been swirling in his stomach ever since he first realised there was something off about him rises even more know, tacky in his throat.

He blinks up and sees El watching him, face neutral but eyes focused carefully on him. Thankfully, no one else is looking at him, too busy staring wide-eyed at Max. Will understands their shock – until this news, Will was sure that he was the only one who felt like this in the whole of Hawkins, adult or child. He had been secure in the knowledge that he was the odd one out and now –

“Like, openly?”

Will blinks up at Mike. He doesn’t look horrified, more curious, brow furrowed and eyes intent on Max.

“Yeah, for the last year or so,” Max says, sounding wearied that she even has to say anything. “We have calc together. It was like, a big deal. Hawkins first out and proud gay kid.”

She does mocking jazz hands, rolling her eyes as she says it, not at Rick but at the notion that she even has to explain this. Will thinks of what she told him about California, this magical sunshiney land where people were different but happy. This is probably nothing to her. And yet, it’s everything to him.

“How did I not hear about this?” Lucas says.

“I think your head is so far up your own ass that you don’t hear much of anything,” Max returns.

“But we do gym together... do you think he’s been looking at my junk?” Dustin says suddenly. El elbows him harshly and he lets out a little yelp of pain.

“Grow up Dustin,” Max says, voice scathing. “It’s 1988. The world is changing.”

Will can’t help but wonder if it actually is. Can’t help but wonder what his friends would say if he told them right now that he feels the same as Rick does inside. He knows what El would say, and Max too. But Lucas... Dustin... Mike?

His mouth feels dry. He reaches for his milkshake but finds it empty. Then there’s a glass of water next to his hand and Mike is looking at him and he feels sick. He wants to leave. He feels sick, and clammy, faint and is it hot in here?

He goes to move, voices swimming in his head, but then Mike is smiling at him, a tiny smile at the corner of his mouth and Will doesn’t move anymore. Mike’s hand nudges the glass of water and Will takes a sip, then another, and another until he feels less hot.

Mike doesn’t move his hand away.

“I can’t believe I didn’t know this,” Lucas is saying, voice sounding far away in Will’s ears. “I’m the student president, I should know this... does he call himself gay?”

“I think he calls himself Rick,” Max bites back. Will can feel her pressing against his side, elbow jutting out to push Lucas out of the way, not all together unfriendly but determinedly annoyed. Will is grateful for the weight of her next to him, the reassuring pressure of knowing that there is someone there.

Mike moves his hand away, and Will doesn’t look up to meet his eye.

“I didn’t know we had a friend of Dorothy in our midst. I’ll have to get into show tunes.”

“Shut up Dustin.”

“What?”

“You’re being a dick.”

“It’s not like I have anything against them-”

“Then maybe just shut up,” El says suddenly, sternly, and to Dustin’s credit, he does. Will doesn’t know if Mike is still looking at him, too busy staring at his lap, his clasped hands, scared that when he goes to move them they’ll shake and give him away.

The table isn’t quite for long, Dustin and Lucas finding something else to argue about, Max finding a way to insert herself into the jibing, whilst El attempts to moderate. The anxiety in Will’s chest starts to ebb away, bit by bit. No one knows. No one suspects. Once again, he has flown unnoticed under the radar, this time for the better. Sometimes there is merit in being unseen, in going unnoticed.

He glances up to laugh at a joke El has made and finds that Mike is staring at him.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

sorry for the delay!! I had a bit of a loss in confidence in this and it really threw me for a while. But I reworked the rest of the plot and now I’m much more confident in what I’m going to write!! There aren’t actually that many chapters left and I will try to get them out quicker than this one!!

If you have stuck with me and have come back to read this now: thank you. From the bottom of my heart. All your kind words mean so much to me. The next chapter is a big one so stay tuned!!

## 20. Chapter 19 & 20

### Summary for the Chapter:

"He hadn't said anything in the car as he drove, and he didn't say anything when he pulled up next to Mirkwood and starting walking in between the trees. It was then that Will had noticed he was still wearing a pair of plaid pyjamas, tucked into hiking boots."

### Notes for the Chapter:

TW: mentions of hate crimes, internalized homophobia & suicide

*There's a certain darkness here, in the middle of a forest, that he has never seen anywhere else. The dappling of the trees above his head, and the way they seem to dilute the sun until it leaks out and seeps down elsewhere, leaving the patch of leaves and dead bark in the woods below cast into a blackness that is almost solid.*

*Will Byers is nine years old and he's running. He's running because it's dark here, and he is scared of the dark. He's running because it's all part of the game, this running, and then hiding. He is running because the laughter of his friends floats through the tree branches, reminding him that this is all just a game, that they came out here to play, and soon they'll be back in the Wheeler's basement, eating pizza and drinking lemonade, and safe.*

*He's running because it's a game, and he is running because he's scared of the dark. Both seem the same to him, in that moment.*

*He steals a glance behind him, to see if he's being followed, but all he can see is the encroaching darkness and all he can hear is the wind whistling past his ears as he runs and runs, blood pounding through his legs to the soles of his feet, breathe pulsing wheezily in and out of his lungs.*

*He looks back again, and a tree root uproots him from his feet and sends him sprawling into the crusted mud. The woods seem to anticipate his fall before he even hits the ground. The whole place seems to hold its breath.*



*His face collides with the leaves and he chokes, letting out a pained groan.*

*There are footsteps behind him, emerging from the darkness. Will sits up, wiping the mud from his trousers with a grimace. He stares up at the figure in front of him, who looks down at him with a grin.*

*He's caught me, Will thinks glumly.*

*"I got him!" Mike shouts over his shoulder. He sounds breathless and triumphant and happy. He offers Will a hand, which he accepts begrudgingly.*

*"I got you," Mike repeats after pulling him to his feet. "You didn't even get to the hide part. I got you."*

*"Are you sure you didn't cheat?" Will says as Mike throws an arm around his shoulder.*

*He's caught me, Will thinks. He's caught me before I even got chance to hide.*

*As Mike pulls him by his arm in the direction of home, Will forgets to be scared of the dark.*

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*"What are we doing here?"*

The woods are quiet this time in the morning. It's just gone six thirty on a Sunday morning, and even nature seems to still be waking up. A few birds circle overhead, but their pace seems lethargic, slow laps of the sky over their home territory. Underneath Will's feet the leaves crinkle, the small noises they make being the only sound to punctuate the sleepy silence.

Mike walks just a few paces in front of him, bundled up in a hat and gloves and thick winter coat, despite the fact that the watery April sunshine is starting to push through the gaps in the trees. Will rubs his hands together and sticks them under his thin denim jacket, a hand-me-down from Jonathan that isn't warm enough for the early hours of the morning. He should've brought a thicker coat, but this

had been the only one on hand when Mike had appeared at his bedroom window earlier this morning like Damien from The Omen.

“It’s just a little further,” Mike says quietly, not turning to look at him. It doesn’t answer Will’s question, but he doesn’t press it any further. Things have been odd between them since the night at the diner. For the first few days after, Will had been expecting the other shoe to drop, for Mike to piece the puzzle together and figure him out. He hadn’t been able to sleep, or eat properly, or focus on anything, the whole time expecting Mike to corner him behind the art building or at his locker and just whale on him.

Nothing happened. Things with Mike stayed the same. If anything, Mike was unbelievably nice to him; saving him a seat at lunch, waiting for him outside his classes when they let out, inviting him to every single track meet, practise or competition. It felt odd, but Will wasn’t one to complain, not when he was getting what he always wanted – attention from Mike.

Still, it felt like they were both walking on egg shells around each other. Their usual casual conversation seemed to bubble away in favour of constant ‘are you okay?’ and ‘how are you feeling?’. In some ways, it felt like Will was talking to a psychiatrist. A very friendly but very professional shrink.

Until this morning. Will had been up asleep when he heard a soft rapping against his window. Bleary eyed, he had drawn the blinds and come face-to-face with Mike, all bundled up, face contorted into a sort of grimace. He had looked pale, like a ghost, with dark bags under his eyes. He looked worlds away from how Will had left him on Friday afternoon.

He hadn’t said anything in the car as he drove, and he didn’t say anything when he pulled up next to Mirkwood and starting walking in between the trees. It was then that Will had noticed he was still wearing a pair of plaid pyjamas, tucked into hiking boots.

Now he stops abruptly, in the middle of a clearing. He turns to look at Will, eyes bloodshot like he hasn’t slept, hat tugged down so far over his face that half of it disappears. He just stands there, arms limp by his side, staring. Staring and staring. Will stops a couple of

meters away. He doesn't know what to do, so he just stares back.

There's something wrong. He knows this, deep in his bones. He knows this was all too good to last. He's figured it all out. This is where Mike whales on him. He brought him here, to beat him up, to kill him maybe, because it's so deserted, and no one would ever know it was Mike, and no one would even care, except his mom and Jonathan and maybe El. No one would even look for him, he thinks in a panic. No one would even know he was dead –

There's a small sniffing sound that snaps Will out of his panic. He looks up and sees that Mike is crying, shoulders crumpling, nose running a river of snot down his face.

"I thought- I thought I cu-could do it," Mike says through tears. Will has never seen him openly weep like this, not even when Will had pummelled his face and broken his nose. "I re-really thought I could do this."

Maybe he was going to kill me, Will thinks, then immediately realises how insane that is. This is *Mike*. The boy who collects dinosaur stickers, and cries at little shop of horrors and can't drink milk unless his mom pours it.

Will takes a few steps forwards and Mike takes a few back, pressing his face against the sleeve of his coat. He's crying harder now, and Will doesn't know what to do.

"Mike?" He says hesitantly. There's no reply. He's not sure Mike even heard him. "Mike? What's wrong? How can I help you?"

Now who sounds like the shrink, he thinks.

Mike laughs through the tears. It sounds like a contorted sob. He peels his face away from his sleeves and stares at Will, a helpless kind of stare that makes him feel cold through. He doesn't say anything, but the stare says it all. There's nothing anyone can do.

Will knows that feeling all too well. His stomach twists, like an invisible hand is squeezing his insides tightly. There's so much hurt on Mike's face, so much pain that it scolds Will's skin. Still, he presses

forward, step by step. Mike steps back for each one, maintaining distance between the two of them until his back collides with a tree and he stumbles to the ground. Will follows him, dropping to his knees.

“Every-everyone is guh-gunna be so ma-mad at me,” Mike hiccups through sobs. Will reaches out to wipe the tears from his face but Mike flinches back so he lets his hand drop. That hurts more than anything he’s ever felt – Mike, flinching away from him, as though he’s scared. Mike, howling like a wounded animal, on his knees in the dirt.

“No one is going to be mad at you,” Will says gently, though he doesn’t even know what it is Mike thinks everyone will be mad about. Mike just cries harder, leaning into the mud as though the sheer velocity of his tears is forcing his body forward. “I promise. No one is going to be mad. I’m not going to be mad. Can you please just tell me what’s going on.”

His voice fractures on the last syllable. He feels close to tears too, cold and tired, on the floor of this woods with the boy he’s known since he was six crying like the world is ending and nothing can fix it.

Mike looks up then, and Will catches sight of his eyes, bloodshot like he’s been crying for quite some time – long before he drove to pick Will up from his house.

He doesn’t know whether it’s the tears, or Mike looking at him, but something gives him the nerve to reach out and take Mike’s hand. He holds it, limp in his palm, until Mike’s fingers begin to twitch, curling around his.

He’s holding my hand, Will thinks. He’s holding my hand, and he’s not crying anymore, and maybe its going to be okay.

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” Mike says. His voice is hoarse from the crying, but he’s not crying anymore, bar a few stray tears still caught on his eyelashes. “I really wasn’t. We graduate in two weeks, I’ve got my scholarship back and I am out of here, but-”

He stops abruptly. Will realises he hasn’t blinked in a few minutes.

“But?” He prompts.

“But... the dinner.”

Will frowns. “The dinner? Benny’s dinner, a few weeks ago?”

“I wasn’t sure till then,” Mike says, voice wobbling like he’s dangerously close to tears again. “I thought I knew, but I didn’t then, until Rick and you, I wasn’t sure about either – about either of us.”

“Either of us what?”

Mike doesn’t say anything. Instead he drops Will’s hand, letting it fall limp to his side. It feels like a thousand small daggers through his heart, that simple act of letting go, of letting his hand fall.

And then Mike kisses him.

At first Will doesn’t realise what is happening. All he can hear in his ears is a tinny high-pitched whistle and his face feels numb, a warm tingling sensation spreading from his lips and up through his skull. He wonders if he’s dead, if this is what it feels like to be dead.

Then he feels something on his cheek, a heavy something, cupping the underside of his chin, and another something on his shoulder, holding him steady. Hands, he realises, then: Mike’s hand.

Everything clicks into place. Mike’s lips are warm and soft on his, and when he pulls back for air, Will pulls him right back in, hands cloying at his sides to keep him close, to hold him flush against his body. There is a siren in his head, blaring to never let him go, to keep this moment going as long as he can, forever if he has to.

Maybe this is what it feels like to be dead. Maybe this is what heaven falls back.

He runs his hand up Mike’s side to grip his shoulder

and tilts his head slightly to the left, and that’s when he feels it. Something wet against his cheek. He pulls back, frowning, and Mike crumbles, crying silently into his cupped hands.

“I’m sorry,” he sobs, pulling his legs up to his chest, holding himself. “I’m sorry.”

The wails penetrate the silence of their surroundings. Will doesn’t know what to do. What can you do, when the person you love kisses you and then cries like someone has died?

He reaches out and wraps his arms around Mike’s trembling body, feeling a twinge of victory when Mike doesn’t flinch away from him. Instead he leans against Will, buries himself against his chest and cries harder.

Will doesn’t ask him what just happened, or why now, with only weeks until graduation, and why here, their old childhood stomping ground. Instead, he just holds him closer and lets him cry.

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“I’m sorry.”

They’re sat in Mike’s car, parked just off the edge of the quarry. It’s been about an hour since the kiss, twenty minutes since Mike stopped crying and said that they should move before they were spotted by any kids playing early morning make-believe or peeved hunters lost in the wrong neck of the woods.

Will isn’t sure why he chose to park up at the quarry. When he was younger, his dad had once yelled at him for going to the quarry with his friends. All they had done was drop things over the edge and watch them splash into the water, making the surface ripple. It was only when he got to high school that he learnt what happened at the quarry – cruising grounds for so-called “homos” to hook up, a boy called Terry had told him in home ec.

That’s what his dad thought he was doing?

They were kids, for god’s sake. They were fucking kids.

“I’m sorry,” Mike says again. Will barely even registered him talking

the first. They've been sat in silence since the kiss, and Mike's timid voice sounds booming in the quiet of the car.

"What for?" Will frowns. He's not sure what Mike wants to take back. He wouldn't be surprised if he was apologising for all of it. It wouldn't be off-colour for Mike to regret kissing him, or even regret knowing him.

"Not for – not for kissing you," Mike says quickly, like he can hear Will's thoughts. "I'm not – I'm not sorry for that."

Will takes a moment to study him. The light had risen further now, breaking out fully above the horizon and it casts Mike face into a watery golden glow. He looks angelic, even with his nose red raw from crying and his hair tussled from running his hands through it.

Will wants to kiss him again, scared that the kiss in the woods will be their first and last, but he can't bring himself to move the final few steps.

"You can be," he says, not unkindly. "I'd understand."

And he would. It would hurt, but he would understand. He'd take it all back, given half the chance.

Mike just shakes his head, scrunching his eyes up. Will looks out onto the quarry ahead of them. It's peaceful in the early morning. There's a car pulled up the other side but he can't see anyone in the driver's seat. They're alone.

"I'm not," Mike looks at him, brow slightly furrowed in a way that Will can't quite place. Despite all the days and nights spent together in this car, this somehow feels like the closest they've ever been.

"I'm just saying... I'd understand if you were."

Will doesn't know why he keeps pushing. He tries to imagine how he would feel if Mike said he did regret it, that he didn't mean it, but all his mind keeps coming back to is the feeling of Mike's lips against his and how no one can regret something as *right* as that.

"I'm sorry for a lot of things," Mike says. Will studies his face for a

minute, eyes stained red from crying, stray leaves still clinging to his jacket sleeves. His mouth is pulled into a tight pout, serious and wrecked and still somehow the most beautiful person Will has ever seen. "And that's not one of them. That will never be one of them."

He means it, Will thinks, and then he thinks: what does that mean for us now?

Mike turns his head away, staring out of the driver's side window. He's staring into the quarry, eyes fixed on where the rocks concave and give way, tumbling into the depth below. A few years ago a girl fell, not far away from where they're parked. Lots of people think she jumped, and the catholic church in town refused to bury her. Will remembers her mom crying outside Hawkins General, her sobs so guttural it sounded like they were being snatched out of her. He remembers the girl too. She was only two years older than Jonathan and Nancy. She used to pick her little brother up from kindergarten sometimes. Will wonders sometimes, if she fell, or if she really did jump.

"I am sorry," Mike says, suddenly turning around and making Will jump. "For waking you up at god knows what time and dragging you here. That was stupid of me. I wasn't- I'm not in my right mind right now. I had a fight with my dad about – about everything really. You know how he is. I don't think he likes me very much."

There's a sadness in Mike's voice, despite the small smile on his face.

"He loves you."

"Yeah, yeah," he waves his hand dismissively. "But I don't think he likes me. If he did before, he certainly doesn't now."

Will frowns "Did you – does he know you're..."

Gay? Is that what Mike is? Is that what he is? Even when he was too young to know what 'gay' was, he knew he didn't want to be it. He still can't even bring himself to think of himself as gay. All he knows is that he loves Mike, and for the first time in a very long time, he believes that Mike might love him too.



“What? No, no! He doesn’t know,” Mike shakes his head, scoffing slightly like the very idea is inconceivable. “He’s just mad I want to study film all the way out in LA. He says that there are plenty of great colleges out here where I can study something that’s actually ‘useful’ or just get a job at his company until I wither away and die. God, I think he’d kill me if he knew.”

Is that true? Will isn’t sure. He can’t imagine Ted Wheeler being the type to hurt his own son, but he can’t see him just accepting it if Mike told him he was in love with another boy. He isn’t sure what his own dad would do to him, if he was still around. Judging by the bruises that used to cover Jonathan’s arms, it wouldn’t be good. Maybe his dad would kill him if he knew how he felt about Mike.

No, he doesn’t want to think about that.

“How long have you known... about me?” He points a finger into his chest, hard.

Mike blinks slowly at him. “A little while now. I didn’t know for sure until the other night, at the dinner. The look on your face when Max said that Rick was... I know that look. I invented that look.”

All this time, Will thinks. All those years, hiding this away from Mike, scared that he was the only one who knew what it felt like. And all this time, Mike hiding away too. Both of them too scared, both of them with this thing in them, this unknown terrifying thing that they couldn’t talk about.

“And... How long have you known about you?”

He expects Mike to go quiet, maybe cry again like he had earlier, sobs rocking both him and Will unsteadily. Instead, he smiles, “A couple of years. I met this guy at this sports camp my dad made me go to. It’s funny, the thing he made me do to stop me turning into a ‘homo’ is the thing that made me... it’s whatever. We shared a bunk and... He was just so kind to me. He reminded me off you,” he stops suddenly, breaking off to smile at Will. It makes him feel like his heart is on fire. “So kind like you, and quiet like he was always just thinking.”

“He was so much taller than me but he still insisted on taking the cramped up bottom bunk. He had these proper shoulders, like he’d already filled out. We were only thirteen but he was already defined, you know, like a full person. Ginger, too. More than Max. He was so ginger.

Some of the other boys tied him to a tree, wrote ‘fag’ on his forehead. They damn near hung him. He got sent home after that. I never saw him again.”

He tips his head back against the headrest. Will wonders if he should be jealous that Mike kissed someone else before him, but all he can think about is this kind boy, this shy ginger boy without a name, and his body hanging limply from a tree. All he can think about is the boy’s dad picking him up the next day unable to meet his eye. His mother scrubbing the words off his forehead with a wet towel.

“What was his name?” Will asks, but Mike isn’t looking at him anymore. He’s staring at the edge of the quarry again.

“I thought I could bury it,” his voice barely a whisper. “I like boys, but I still like girls. Like Bowie. Always thought I’d be able to choose who I fell for, end up with a nice girl and then I could just forget about all this crap. And then a couple of weeks back I realised that this is who I am forever. This isn’t reversible. I don’t get to pick who I fall for, I don’t have any say and I’m – I’m stuck like this.”

“If it helps...” Will says quietly. “So am I.”

He presses his lips together, letting his words sit in the silent vacuum of the car. Mike doesn’t say anything either. He’s still sniffing even though the tears have stopped falling and he’s still staring out of the window, into the abyss below them.

Will reaches out and grabs his hand, before he loses courage. Mike’s fingers are slender and bony, his nails short from biting them but dirty too, caked in the mud from where he had fallen earlier. HE wraps his own fingers around Mike’s and squeezes tightly. The very action makes him feel breathless and a little dizzy.

Mike doesn’t react, his hand still slack in Will’s. Instead he turns and

says, a little teary, "You're too nice to me. Why are you so nice to me?"

There's no answer to that. Will presses his mouth shut even tighter, knowing that if he opens it, he'll say something stupid, like 'I love you' or 'I've always loved you' or 'forget about UCLA, let's just drive away now, leave stupid fucking Hawkins and never look back'. And even though he's kissed Mike, even though he's holding his hand in his lap right now, that still feels too big to say.

Mike is still staring at him, mouth slightly downturned in a way that makes him look much younger than he is. It makes him look six again, sitting at Will's kitchen table gluing pipe cleaners to milk cartons to make a space ship, legs swinging back and forth, still miles away from scraping the ground.

"Mike..." Will says because Mike won't stop looking at him, his voice sounding pathetic in his own ears. "You know why..."

*And he does know why. He's always known why.*

"You're my best friend," Mike says. His fingers close tightly around Will's, squeezing so hard that he can feel his pulse thrumming through his veins, up his arm and down to his heart.

"You're my best friend too," Will says, voice barely more than a reverent whisper.

Mike kisses him then. Not a desperate, messy kiss like before, but something softer, lips barely even grazing his at first. He's leaning over the gear stick, body twisted at an awkward angle, but he doesn't even seem to care. Will lifts his hands, tentatively placing them on his shoulders, holding the both of them steady.

It's still barely morning, the sun scraping low on the horizon and casting the whole quarry with a gentle orange glow. It's barely morning, and he's eighteen and there's Mike kissing him, hands sliding up and down his shoulders, and the world has never been brighter than this.

He never wants it to end.

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

it's be so long. if you're still here, and still reading, thank you. you're the best.

## **Author's Note:**

I'm sorry this took so long!! A lot happened in my life between finishing TTIHH and starting this story but I'm now more ready than ever to write this sequel!!

I'm really excited for the plot of this one. A lot more Byler, as well as more development of the rest of the party and even Nancy (hopefully) making an appearance!!

Please tell me anything you want to happen in this fic and it may be featured!! At the moment it's planned for 15 chapters but it could end up being more, who knows?